MANAS

MANAS · SEMETEY · SEYTEK

AN EPIC SAGA NOVEL

GAZÂ'NIN NEFERİ Y.C.

MANAS

MANAS · SEMETEY · SEYTEK

A saga novel rendered in prose from the Sayakbay Karalaev variant

Three books · Forty-two chapters

AN EPIC SAGA NOVEL

GAZÂ'NIN NEFERİ Y.C.

COLOPHON

Manas — An Epic Saga Novel (Manas · Semetey · Seytek) is an original literary novel, based on the plot of the 500,553-line epic trilogy set down between 1935 and 1947 from the lips of Sayakbay Karalaev (1894–1971).

Source of the plot: «Манас», «Семетей», «Сейтек» эпостору — Саякбай Каралаевдин айтымында, Turar Publishing House, Bishkek 2010 (prepared by Aynek Jaynakova; general editor Abdıldajan Akmataliev). The copyrighted editorial layers of the source editions (prefaces, scholarly commentary, glossaries, and the illustrations of Theodor Herzen) have not been included in this work.

The text of the epic is a work of folk literature (folklore). The plot, scenes, dialogues, narration, cover design, and entire page layout of this novel are unique to this publication.

The novel comprises forty-two chapters: Manas is told in twelve, Semetey in twenty-one, and Seytek in nine. The names of persons and places are preserved in their epic spelling.

© Gazâ'nın Neferi Y.C., 2026. All rights reserved.

PREFACE

This book retells the trilogy set down from the lips of Sayakbay Karalaev, the great reciter of Manas, the longest epic in the world — Manas, Semetey, and Seytek — this time with the breath of a novel. Here the verse has been poured into prose; yet the drum's rhythm, the gallop of horses, the moan of the lament, and the weight of the oath were meant to remain upon the page.

A saga novel is the river of three generations: Manas, born in exile, founding the khanate; Semetey, raised fatherless, returning to his homeland; Seytek, born in the enemy's tent, making the line whole again. Forty-two chapters join one another like the forty-two bends of a single stream — mourning turns to resolve, resolve to vengeance, and vengeance, at last, to peace.

The novel remains faithful to the plot of the epic's Karalaev variant; the names of persons and places are preserved in their epic spelling. But the scenes, the dialogues, and the inner worlds are the novelist's own: what the epic said stands as it was said — how it was said is told anew.

The word belongs to the manaschi; the fault, to the novelist.

Gazâ'nın Neferi Y.C.
Antalya, 2026

CONTENTS

BOOK I — MANAS: The Founding of the Khanate

1 Fathers, Exile, and the Birth of Manas

2 The Koçku Raid and Esenkan's Ten Thousand

3 Victory over Coloy and the Raising of the Khan

4 The Altay Wars

5 Koşoy Joins and the Migration to Talas

6 Bakay, the Forty Companions, and the Khanship

7 The Tale of Çubak Baatır

8 The Winning of Kanıkey

9 The Clash of Almambet and Çubak, and Almambet's Jomok

10 The Reconnaissance of Almambet and Sırgak

11 The Great Campaign: The March on Beecin

12 Kococaş, the Martyrdom of the Warriors, and the Death of Manas

BOOK II — SEMETEY: The Return to the Homeland

13 Mourning, Exile, and the Road to Buhara

14 Taytoru's Race and the Rise of Semetey

15 The Secret of the Bloodline and Kanıkey's Long Night

16 The Közkaman Betrayal and the Call of Talas

17 The Hidden Tomb and the Reunion of Orphans

18 The Awakening of Akkelte and the Great Migration

19 The Blood-Stained Throne and Ayçürök the White Swan

20 On the Trail of Akşuñkar and the Wedding at Ürgönç

21 The Feast of Kökötöy and the Trials of the Field of Heroes

22 The War for Ayçürök and the Road to Beecin
23 The Raid on the Herds and Koñurbay in Ambush
24 The Wing of the White Swan and the Little Campaign
25 The Siege of Talas and the Field of Champions
26 The Witch's Winter and the Broken Dam
27 The Fall of the One-Eyed Giant and the Lone Falcon
28 The Brother from the Unseen and the Rain of Lead
29 A Game at the Enemy's Table and the Price of Blood
30 The Triumph of Two Heads and the Dark Fate
31 The Golden Crown of Betrayal and the Last Bed
32 The Treacherous Spear and the Usurper's Throne
33 The Storm of Kürpüldök and the Great Vanishing

BOOK III — SEYTEK: THE LINE MADE WHOLE

34 The Lion Born in the Enemy's Tent
35 The Swan's Ruse and the End of Kıyaz
36 The Slave Woman at the Spring and the White Dagger
37 The Grey Wolf in the Black Cave
38 The Coming of Kuyalı and the Price of an Oath
39 The Bride of the Last Day and the Lioness
40 The Spirit of the Ancestors and the Broken Lance
41 The Dying Hurricane and the White Beard's Prayer
42 The Peri Brides and the Glad Tidings of Zulpukor

BOOK I

MANAS

The Founding of the Khanate

❖ ❖ ❖

CHAPTER 1

Fathers, Exile, and the Birth of Manas

— ❖ —

The men of the old age knew the reckoning of lineage as they knew the drinking of water. Let a white-bearded elder strike his knee by the hearth and begin to speak, and he would pour forth the names that had come down from the first forefather, Tügöl Han, one by one; each name a stone, each stone set as if into the wall of a fortress. From Tügöl Han had come Böyön into the world, from Böyön Çayan, from Çayan Nogoy and Şıgay; all of this line had been khans, all had been seated upon the white felt and lifted toward the sky. When the telling came to Karakan, the elder's voice would thicken, and a shiver would pass down the backs of those who listened; for Karakan was the last great link of that blessed chain, and everyone knew that beyond him the chain was broken, and beyond the break lay darkness.

When Karakan died, they say, the snows fell early upon the Ala-Too. The mourning lasted forty days; for forty days no smoke rose from the roof-crowns of the grey yurts, no kımız was drawn, the komuz was silenced. On the evening of the fortieth day an old shepherd came down to the camp from the rocks above the Talas and said this: — I saw a wolf pack circling a flock of sheep that had no head. The khan is dead, the people are left leaderless; the wolves have already caught the scent.

No one rebuked the shepherd. For in the east, in the direction of Beecin, there were those who had caught the scent long since.

Molto, khan of the Black Kalmuk, and Alööke, lord of the Manchu, came to Karakan's land not first with their armies but with their ledgers. They counted the Argın, they counted the Kirghiz; they counted the camps, the horse herds, the girl children and the boy children. Then Alööke drew out his whip, swung it through the air this way and that, and divided the two khan-less peoples in two beneath the whip's shadow, as men divide sheep. — That side is Molto's, he said, and this side is mine. Whoever resists — his son upon the stake, his daughter into the sack.

There were those who resisted; their names are not spoken here lest they be forgotten, for they were not forgotten. But the sword's edge was crowded that year. The hearths went out one by one. One night a camp along the Sır-Derya was put to the torch, and in the light of the flames the people were scattered down four roads: some were driven to Kangay, some fell to Urum, some were flung as far as the Crimea, and some were lined up on the stony road of the black Altay. Mother was parted from daughter, elder brother torn from younger; only the sky knew the number of those who died without ever seeing one another's faces again.

Karakan's sons too received their portions of this dividing. The portion that fell to Cakıp was the Altay: together with forty families of Kirghiz — not permitted to take even a handful of ash, a pinch of earth — he was herded before the Kalmuk horsemen and driven east. Cakıp was then a young man whose moustache had barely darkened; he left behind his father's great encampment, the willows of the Talas, the white-snowed Ala-Too of his childhood. There was snow in the passes; for three days and three nights the blizzard did not slacken, for three days and three nights ice hung from the manes of the horses, for three days and three nights no one could see another's face. Whoever fell on the road stayed where he fell; the Kalmuk rider drove his horse straight over the fallen. At the mouth of one pass the caravan halted; the camels at the front had set their feet against the ice and were

bellowing. Young Cakıp dismounted, took the halter of the foremost camel, spread his own coat over the ice, and led the beast across upon it. The women and children behind him walked in the track he had opened. The Kalmuk corporal saw this, pointed at Cakıp with the butt of his whip, and said something to the man beside him; no one understood what he said, but from that day the whip fell more rarely on Cakıp's back. It is an old saying of the steppe: even an enemy steps back a pace before a man who knows his work. One night Cakıp looked into the face of an old man lying frozen at the foot of a poplar, and swore an oath within himself: an accounting for this road will one day be demanded; if I cannot demand it, my son will. Then he laughed at his own words, bitterly: he had no son, nor any certainty of one. Before him lay only the road, and at the road's end a wild mountain.

✦ ✦ ✦

The place they called the Altay seemed to them at first like the mouth of a giant: slopes black with pine, roaring gorges, shadowed ravines that never turned their backs to the sun even in summer. The forty families passed the first winter half-starved, half-naked, in grey yurts huddled close against one another. Among those forty families was a man who was like a guide finding the way by touch in the dark: Akbaltay, lord of the Noygut. He was a man advanced in years, sharp of word, wide of heart; in the first spring of the exile he gathered the people and spoke thus: — Weeping will not bring back the Talas. This mountain too has water that flows, and beneath these stones too there is not emptiness. Let him who knows how to sow grain sow, let him who knows how to hammer iron hammer; the way to escape being the Kalmuk's slave is to eat from your own cauldron.

The people held to Akbaltay's word. They sowed barley at the mouths of the streams, they scattered wheat; the first year the birds ate it, the second year the hail struck it, the third year the earth grew ashamed and gave. On the day of that first harvest the women embraced the sheaves and wept; the smell of bread grown in exile makes a man both forget his homeland and remember it. Akbaltay flung a handful of grain into the air: — Here, he said, is the thing the Kalmuk cannot give and cannot take from our hands. The earth asks no one; whoever bends and sows, it is his. Cakıp, for his part, was drawn to the stone of the mountain; one day, scooping and sifting the sand of a stream, he found yellow grains left in his palm. It was gold. From that day Cakıp waded to his waist in the water and sifted sand; in winter he broke the ice and sifted; the more he sifted, the more he found, the more he

found, the more he hoarded, and the more he hoarded, the more he multiplied. He gave the gold to Kalmuk caravans and bought sheep, sold the sheep and bought mares, bred the mares and made a herd. The years chased one another, and one day the camps of the Altay reckoned that Cakıp had four tümen of horses, sheep past counting, camels like a dappled mountain. His herds spread over three days' journey of ground; his herdsmen had herdsmen of their own. Even the Kalmuk lords, when they spoke of him, had taken to saying "rich Cakıp."

But wealth, when all is said, is like felt carried into an empty dwelling: you may spread it wide, yet what use is it if there is no one to warm? Cakıp had two wives: the elder, Çıyırdı, a woman dignified, grave, blessed of hand; the younger, Bakdöölöt, gentle-natured and quiet. From neither had Cakıp seen the face of a child. Fourteen years passed, and fourteen more; frost fell upon his hair, white came down into his beard. At night he would wander among his herds, watching the mares foal, and then, for no reason at all, a fist would lodge itself in his throat.

One evening — it was no barren year, the herds were fat, the cauldrons were boiling — Cakıp came to the yurt, crossed the threshold, sat in the place of honour, but did not drink kımız. Çıyırdı set a bowl before him; Cakıp pushed the bowl away with his hand and poured out what he had carried within him like a stone until that day: — My wealth is like a mountain — for whom? When I die I have no child to weep "my father" after me. I am like an owl roosting in my own dwelling. The people call me rich; I call myself dry — a dry tree. Who will pour water on my grave, who will blow upon my hearth? You tell me, Çıyırdı!

At this point in his speech his voice broke; he laid his whip on the ground and covered his face with both palms. Great Cakıp, master of four tümen of horses, sobbed like a child.

Çıyırdı neither protested nor defended herself. Only that night, after everyone slept, she took her shawl and went out from the yurt. Above the camp, standing alone among the rocks, there was a wild apple tree; they called it blessed, they called it the wishing tree. Çıyırdı came to the foot of the tree, knelt upon the snow, and lifted her face to the sky: — O Thou whose power is wide! If a Kıdır's road passes this way, if a çilten walks upon this mountain, let him hear my voice. Give me a child; give a head for my arms, an ember for my hearth. Give one spark to the dying hearth of the Kirghiz.

Three nights she went to the foot of that tree, three nights she pleaded, three nights the stars listened to her. To roll upon the ground beneath the blessed tree was the old custom

of those who made a wish; and Çıyırdı spread her dignity upon the snow, circled the tree, pressed her face to the earth. As she turned homeward at the end of the third night, she felt a warmth upon her back, as if someone had laid a fur across her shoulders. She turned and looked: there was no one. Only on the bare branches of the apple tree, out of season, a single white blossom had opened. Çıyırdı told this to no one; only, from that day on, when she rose in the mornings, her face wore the still look of women who sing their songs within themselves. One day Bakdöölöt asked: — Sister, something is upon you — is all well? Çıyırdı smiled: — I am waiting, she said; do not ask me what I wait for, I do not know it myself. But what is coming is on the road.

✦ ✦ ✦

In those same days, at the other end of the world, in the forty-gated palace of Beecin, Esenkan sat upon his throne, and his spirit was troubled. He summoned his diviners; forty diviners came, they burned the shoulder blade of a sheep, they poured sand, they read not the chart of the stars but the stars themselves. The eldest among them, an ancient whose teeth had fallen, gazed long at the crack in the shoulder blade, and his face went the colour of paper. Esenkan asked: — What did you see? Speak. — If I speak, my head is forfeit; if I do not speak, your realm is, my khan. — Speak; your head is in my safekeeping. The old man swallowed and spoke: — From the Kirghiz a hero will be born. His name will be called Manas. At twelve he will gird on the sword; at twenty none who stand before him will remain standing. It is he who will lay waste this Beecin, this throne, these forty gates. He is born, or is about to be born; the shoulder blade shows the two as one.

Esenkan did not sleep that night. The next day he gathered his council and commanded his scribes; the name of the unborn child was written into the black book of the state, into the dañza: Manas. A name that found its place in the enemy's ledger before its owner had ever been laid in a cradle. Then Esenkan summoned his spies; forty he dressed in merchants' garb, on forty he put the dervish's cloak; some he made beggars, some healers peddling remedies. — Go, he said, go to the Altay, go to Kangay, look under every stone where the Kirghiz have been scattered. Count the bellies of the women with child, ask the names of the newborn boys. Whoever hears the name Manas, let him bring me the news not with his ears but with the four hooves of his horse. If I find that child in the cradle, I will burn him with his cradle; if I find him in swaddling, with his swaddling.

The spies dispersed. After that winter, strange faces began to appear in the camps of the Altay: merchants who sold silk but did not haggle, dervishes who prayed but mistook their qibla, healers who examined an aching tooth while their eyes wandered always to the bellies of women with child. The camps sensed them, sensed them and said nothing; the man of the steppe lays a table for the guest and puts a lock upon his secret.

One day one of these — a merchant carrying more questions than silk — worked his way as far as Cakıp's aul. He couched his camel and spread his wares; the women gathered, the children swarmed. The man sold his silk cheap and took news in payment: — Has there been a wedding in the camp this year, has there been a birth? A bountiful place, this — do many cradles rock here? One of the old women, the mother of Kambar, laughed with her toothless mouth: — Cradles, son? In our camp the sheep drop lambs and the mares drop foals; it is our women who have gone barren on this mountain — it is the water. The merchant glanced once at the way Çıyırdı had passed, and glanced again; but Çıyırdı that day walked wrapped in her wide fur with a load of firewood on her back, and in her walk there was no trace of the thing the man was seeking. The merchant raised his camel before evening came and went back the way he had come. When he was gone, Akbaltay took the old woman's hand: — Bless that mouth of yours, he said; on the day a lie saves a thousand lives, that lie is counted among the prayers.

And in just those days Cakıp dreamed a dream. In his dream he had alighted upon the peak of a mountain he did not know, and had taken upon his arm a white gyrfalcon; such a bird that its talons were of the wolf and its gaze of the lightning; it spread its wings once, and its shadow covered the world. When the bird shook itself and screamed, the cranes of the sky came down and stood in ranks upon the earth, and the foxes of the earth shrank into their dens. When Cakıp woke, his heart was pounding like a lathered horse. That same night Çıyırdı too dreamed: in her right palm she held the sun, in her left palm the moon; neither burned her — they warmed. Then a golden sword came down from the sky, and its hilt came of itself into Çıyırdı's hand; she girded the sword at her waist, and when she girded it the earth shook, but Çıyırdı did not shake.

When morning came, Cakıp had the cauldrons of the camp set boiling, had a barren mare slaughtered, and gave the dream-feast. The white-beards gathered, Akbaltay at their head; the dreams were laid out before them. Akbaltay listened, stroked his white beard long and slowly, then struck his knee and straightened: — Hold the head of the spring — give me my reward for good tidings! The white gyrfalcon, Cakıp, is a hero son; a hero will alight

upon your arm. To hold the sun and the moon in the palms is light for both worlds at once. The golden sword is a lord given from heaven; the mother who girds it becomes the mother of a lord. Rejoice, Cakıp! The stream that has run dry for forty years shall see the flood.

The feast did not last forty days, but forty days' joy was pressed into one. And not long after, that familiar shadow, that sweet weariness, came down upon Çıyırdı's face: she was with child. Toward the middle of her term she woke Cakıp one night; her eyes in the darkness were two embers. — I crave meat, she said, but not the meat of sheep. I crave the heart of a tiger, Cakıp. My heart demands it; if you do not give it, my heart will devour me.

At first Cakıp did not believe his own ears; then he understood that this craving came not from the woman but from what she carried. He sent the fiercest of his hunters into the mountains; the man roamed crag and stone for seven days, shot a black tiger, cut out its heart and brought it. Çıyırdı turned that heart over the coals and ate it; as she ate, blood came back into her face and flame came into her eyes. The old women of the camp whispered to one another: — The son of a mother who has eaten tiger's heart becomes a tiger. What is in this womb will be a hero born of heroes.

✦ ✦ ✦

The birth came on a winter's night with one wolf-month yet to run, and it did not come easily. Çıyırdı writhed for two days and two nights; the women of the camp filled the yurt, the midwives poured sweat. Cakıp in those days was with his horse herds, out among the far pastures; not because so great a man could not suffer himself to sit in the yurt awaiting his child's birth, but because the waiting set a wolf loose inside him, and he had fled to the herds. At dawn of the third night a cry filled the yurt; but this cry was not like the wailing of other infants — it was as if a young wolf were howling in a narrow pass. The midwife snatched up the child, snatched him up and saw a strange thing: the babe's right hand was clenched fast and would not open. When with great effort they pried the fingers apart, a black clot of blood fell from his palm to the ground; hard as stone, a clot the size of a sheep's eye.

That night, they say, a strange radiance moved above the yurt; some said a column of light came down through the roof-crown, others said white-bearded, white-turbaned

figures circled the camp. Some said they were the çiltens, some said the Forty had come. Whoever saw whatever he saw — one thing there was that could not be denied: on that frost-rimed night, no snow had fallen upon the black stone before the yurt.

The women looked into one another's faces. The eldest of them, with her toothless mouth, remembered a forgotten saying: — He who is born with a clot of blood in his palm has come into the world to shed blood. He will either break or build. This boy will do both at once.

The bearer of glad tidings rode to Cakıp fit to burst his horse. — Süyünçü, Cakıp, süyünçü! Light to your eyes — you have a son! For a moment Cakıp stood rooted where he was; the longing of forty years passed through his breast in a single instant and his tongue was bound. Then he lifted the messenger down from his horse and embraced him, stripped the fur from his own back and dressed him in it, caught out nine mares and gave them to him: — It is too little, he said; ask of me what you will — today there is nothing that shall not come from Cakıp!

He changed horses three times before he reached the aul; when he entered, there was frost on his brows and ice in his beard. At the threshold of the yurt he paused a moment; that threshold he had crossed for forty years seemed to him that day an impassable mountain pass. He went in, looked at Çıyırdı's pale but shining face, then bent over the swaddling. The babe was not asleep; he looked at the man who came through the door with unblinking eyes, as if he had long been expecting him. Under that gaze, before his own son, Cakıp felt a strange thing: something beyond joy, something akin to reverence. He gathered up the swaddled child and raised him toward the roof-crown: — Thanks be to the Giver, he said; against all that You have taken, You have given this one; let all the rest be Yours freely. Çıyırdı spoke softly from where she lay: — Do not gaze so into his eyes before his forty days are out; the evil eye can come even from a father. Cakıp laughed; for the first time in forty years, he laughed from the very floor of his chest.

The feast was raised, such a feast as the Altay had never seen: cauldrons boiled in nine places, a hundred mares were slaughtered, wrestlers wrestled, racers raced their horses. The strongmen came out onto the field of contest; the champion of the Noygut threw the Kalmuk's huge wrestler in three holds, and Cakıp robed them both alike, that no bitterness might remain between them. Kımız flowed like a flood, what could be milked was milked, what could be drunk was drunk; the komuz-players carried the night through to morning. Kalmuk and Kirghiz, all the camps around came; none who came went back empty — he

who came without a horse returned with a horse, he who came on foot, with a camel. When in the midst of the feast the matter came to the giving of the name, the white-beards looked at one another; to give a name is no light work, and least of all after such a birth. At just that moment a man slipped through the crowd; no one had seen him come. A dervish, white-bearded, in a white robe, a staff in his hand; his eyes were like two deep wells. He walked straight to the child's swaddling, asked leave of no one, and laid his right hand on the boy's brow: — This one's name was given long ago, he said; it fell to me only to speak it. Its "M" is the mountain wrapped in cloud; its "nas" is the breath of the people. Let his name be Manas. Let his water be of the Talas, his strength of the Ala-Too, his life of the Kirghiz. At twelve may his way open before him; may his forty companions never fail from behind him.

— Give the blessing, dervish father, they said; the dervish opened his two palms and gave the blessing. Then the crowd turned back to the kımız, the meat, the games; when they looked again, the place where the dervish had sat was empty. No one had seen him go out the door, no one had seen him mount a horse. Akbaltay knit his brows, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and said to Cakıp in a low voice: — He who came was no mortal man, Cakıp. My tongue will not say it was the Kıdır; my eyes will not let me say it was not. But if it was he who spoke the name, then that name was given in the heavens.

Then his face darkened: — And that name, before the heavens, was written in the ledger of Beecin. Esenkan's forty spies sell silk among these camps and recite their prayers. There are a hundred here today who heard this name; tomorrow they will be a thousand, and the day after it will reach Esenkan's ear. Let us bury the name, Cakıp. Let the child grow, and let his name sleep in the earth.

Cakıp's heart burned; to bury his son's name on the very day he wished to cry it out to the world was like carrying fire in his bosom. But he looked into Akbaltay's eyes and bowed his head. The people at the feast were put under oath; word of warning went from camp to camp. And as the child grew, on account of his coarse, thick hair and his massive frame, a nickname was contrived for him — an ordinary name, a name to keep him from notice: Çoncindi, the big shaggy-haired boy. The spies came, asked, listened; "Cakıp has a son found late in life," they said; "what is his name?" they said. Even the children of the camp spoke with one mouth: — Çoncindi, they said; a wild, unruly boy — he herds sheep. The spies noted it down and passed on. Only once did the matter turn on a hair's breadth: a man in a wandering dervish's guise was handing out kurut to the children of the camp,

loosening their tongues, when one of the little ones mumbled: — Our Man... Before the word was finished, his elder sister landed a slap on the back of the boy's neck: — Manav-baba is what we call our herdsman, she said; you would go asking. The dervish smiled, and the smile did not reach his eyes; the next day he left that place, but Akbaltay's men followed him at a distance for three days' journey, and when they saw him turn east they came back with their hearts in their mouths. The name in the dañza waited in the ledger; its owner grew up in the bosom of the Altay, in the shadow of a false name.

He grew, but he did not grow easily; or rather, those who raised him did not have an easy time of it. At six he was drawing all the boys of the camp along behind him, and in the battles they raised as games he ground the sons of Kalmuk lords into the dust. At eight he pulled a colt out of the stream by its tail; at ten he laid fifteen-year-olds flat on their backs at wrestling. There was no reckoning his mischief: now he overturned someone's cauldron, now he stampeded a caravaneer's camel, now he fell to brawling with the Kalmuk boys and tumbled three of them at once into the stream. Once, the son of one of the Kalmuk lords, beaten at a game, shouted in his fury "exile's seed"; Çoncindi lifted the boy bodily, set him across the back of his horse, carried him and left him at his father's threshold, and said: — Take your son, and take his tongue as well; if you cannot keep the two together, give one of them to me. The lord first boiled over, then looked at the light in the child's eyes and fell silent; that silence was long recounted in the camps. The complaints piled up at Cakıp's door. Cakıp swelled with secret pride on the one hand, and on the other his heart failed him for fear: this overflowing flood would catch the eye, and once it caught the eye, the ear of Beecin would hear. In the end he and Akbaltay took counsel together and resolved to give the boy over to Oşpur, a grave and steady shepherd who grazed sheep on the mountain pasture far from the camp. — Let him herd sheep, said Cakıp; let his hand learn work and his eye come down from the sky. Besides, the high pasture is desolate; in a desolate place neither the name draws the eye, nor the child.

Oşpur was a shepherd of forty years' standing; a man sparing of speech, quick with the whip, soft of heart. He took Çoncindi to his side and set about teaching him all he knew of the tongue of sheep, the temper of the mountain, the track of the wolf. The first days went hard: the boy scattered the flock, set the rams butting and lost himself in watching them, and instead of chasing a runaway lamb would plant himself in its path and laugh. One evening Oşpur caught him drinking the ayran that had been set aside, and raised the whip; raised it, but could not bring it down, for the child did not run, did not bow his head, but

looked him straight in the eye. — Strike, he said; if you are in the right, it will not hurt. Oşpur brought the whip down — not on the boy's back, but on his own boot. — The account between you and me is kept in another ledger, son, he muttered; then with his own hand he held out to him what was left of the ayran. But his pupil cared less for the sheep than for the wolf that eyed the sheep. He gathered the herd-boys of the pasture about him; some forty lads, half of them Kirghiz and half poor Kalmuk children, called him "our head" of their own accord. Çoncindi devised games for them on the mountain, but the games always came out at the same gate: forming ranks, laying ambush, closing on a make-believe enemy from both sides. They made lances of sticks and shields of felt; they made contests of stone-throwing and of leaning from the saddle at full gallop to snatch a thing from the ground. Oşpur saw all this and pretended not to see; only one evening, after the sheep were folded, he looked long into the boy's face: — You will be no shepherd, son, he said. You will not even be a wolf. You are the thing whose shadow falls over wolf and shepherd alike; it is not for me to give you your name — those whose it was to give have given it. I only pray that shadow cools his own people first.

Çoncindi did not sleep that night; something within him was stirring like a seed waiting beneath the winter. He did not know his own name; but he seemed to feel that his name knew him, that it was calling him from somewhere, and that the caller was drawing nearer and nearer.

✦ ✦ ✦

In the autumn of that year, when the boy was on the verge of twelve, a new warden of Esenkan's came to that region of the Altay: Koçku, they called him — a Kalmuk lord gross of flesh, thick of neck, his eyes like bowls of blood. He took the tribute twofold, and added a layer of insult in the taking; whatever the camps possessed that looked fat, he had set apart as "the khan's share." He made no secret of having set his eye on Cakıp's herds; "what does an exiled Kirghiz want with so much wealth," he kept muttering, and sent his men out over the pastures to make count upon count.

One day Koçku's horse-wranglers, ten riders, came up to Oşpur's pasture. Their business that day was not counting; their bellies wanted meat, and they cut a fat mare out of the first herd they came upon and made to slaughter it. Oşpur stood against them: — This stock is Cakıp's, and the khan's share has been paid; take your hands off it. The answer

was the whip; the whip split the old shepherd's face, and blood ran down into his white beard.

The children were sitting on a rock-top eating kurut. Çoncindi saw the blood; he saw the blood running down the white beard, the fleshy hand gripping the whip, the old man doubled over on the ground — and the moment he saw it, a red curtain came down before his eyes. Those who were there swore to it ever after: the boy did not rise from his place, he was hurled from it; he had nothing in his hand but a stick, and with the stick he tore the first rider out of his saddle, seized the second by the collar and dashed him to the ground, and snatched up the fallen man's sword. Ten riders, before a boy of twelve, first laughed; then their laughter broke off in the middle. The forty herd-boys, just as they had learned at their games, rained stones from two flanks and panicked the horses; Çoncindi swung the sword once, and swung it again. Two Kalmuks stayed on the ground; the rest lay flat on their horses' necks and fled; and as they fled they looked back, and repented of looking: the boy was not pursuing the fleers; he stood where he was, the bloody sword aloft, roaring in a voice that set the mountain ringing. What he roared, those far off did not hear; those near heard it, and for years told no one.

Oşpur, wiping the blood from his face, looked at the boy's feet, then at his face, and for the first time bowed to him: — From this day my tongue will not suffer me to call you Çoncindi, he said. But neither will I speak your name in the open street. You are what you are; your name will find you.

The news reached Koçku before the fleeing riders did, and reached the camps before Koçku; for news has no feet — it has wings. And it grew in passing from mouth to mouth: the ten riders became seven, and then seventy; the stick became a sword, the sword a lightning-bolt. And somewhere — in whose mouth it happened is not known — the forbidden name came up out of the earth for the first time; someone, at some hearth-side, lowered his voice and said: — Could this be Cakıp's son — Manas?

Once a name is spoken, it cannot be taken back. The spark had fallen into dry grass. In three days three valleys heard it, in seven days seven camps; from end to end the Altay shuddered with a secret trembling: Manas, Manas, Manas. Some whispered the name from fear, some from hope; the children of the exile fell asleep murmuring it.

Koçku, for his part, neither feared nor hoped; he raged. Two of his men were carrion, and his honour lay in the dirt. He sent out messenger upon messenger, had his seven hundred riders string their bows and whet their swords. — A shepherd's whelp, he said, has

raised his hand against Esenkan's warden. If I do not go and sweep that camp down to its very grass, let them call me Koçku no more.

That evening Cakıp stood at the threshold of his yurt, watching the mountains darken in the east. Akbaltay came to his side, and for a while the two were silent. Then the old man spoke, his voice trembling with a weariness and a strange joy at once: — Have you heard, Cakıp? The name is out. Now nothing we bury can cover it, and nothing we send away can outrun it. Koçku is gathering seven hundred riders, they say; behind the seven hundred stands Esenkan, and behind Esenkan the dañza. The name in the ledger has found its owner.

Cakıp made no answer. Down the pasture road, through the red dust of evening, his son was descending: his stick on his shoulder, forty children at his side, the sun at his back. In that moment Cakıp understood that the child he had awaited forty years had never been his child alone; he was the child too of the extinguished hearths, of the scattered camps, of the dead left behind in the Talas — and the payment of that debt was about to begin, with seven hundred riders. Within himself he turned over the oath he had sworn at the foot of that old poplar: an accounting for this road will one day be demanded; if I cannot demand it, my son will.

Beyond the mountains, in some unseen place, the hoofbeats of seven hundred horses were gathering. And the night that came down upon the Altay seemed itself to know that no night would ever again be as the nights before.

CHAPTER 2

The Koçku Raid and Esenkan's Ten Thousand

— ❖ —

The fires of the feast had gone out, the cauldrons had cooled, the guests' horses had long since scattered to their own pastures; but the word lived longer than fire and longer than smoke. The count of the horses Cakıp had slaughtered in his son's honour grew from mouth to mouth; nine hundred mares became a thousand, and the thousand became fifteen hundred; the kımız flowed like a river, they said, gold ingots were scattered by the sackful, they said. The word crossed the hidden valleys of the Altay, crept in among the grey yurts of the Kalmuk lords, and there, by the hearth-sides, it turned into a whisper. Whisper is great with sedition; and sedition, once born, neither suckles nor asks for a cradle — it shoots up to full height in a single night.

— The Burut grows strong, said one of the lords, resting his bowl of kımız upon his knee. Cakıp, whom we brought here as an exile, no longer suffers his stock to be counted. The mountain is his, the stream is his; the grass is our grass, the water is our water, and what fattens on them is his property.

— Were it only property, we might bear it, said another, lowering his voice. A son has been born to him. On the day of his birth, they say, the white-beards gathered and could not fix on a name, and a dervish come out of the wilds gave him his name. Have you not heard what is said of that child? Wolf-eyed, they call him, dragon-breathed. At play, they say, he cripples boys of his own years; when he angers, blood comes down into his eyes.

— What can come of a child, said a third; but his voice carried no conviction even to himself.

For the old men of the Kalmuk knew the old ledgers. In Beecin, in the dañza kept in Esenkan's palace — that black-bound book of prophecy — it was written: from the Burut a man of blood shall be born, his name shall be Manas, and he shall make first the Altay and then the whole world too narrow to hold him. Because of that writing, many years before, the bellies of the Kirghiz women with child had been searched, the cradles had been ransacked, and Cakıp's camp had been driven all the way to the Altay. If now in that place of exile a feast had been raised and a name given, the hearts of the old men did not shudder for nothing.

The word turned and wandered until it came to the warden of the border marches, to Koçku. Koçku was Esenkan's eye and ear on the Altay frontier; his height filled a doorway, his shoulders were two men's shoulders, his wrist could bend iron; and his rage was the size of his body. He could gather seven hundred riders with one whistle and rule seven hundred riders with one look. When the sedition reached his pavilion, Koçku was eating meat; he licked his greasy fingers and flung his knife, and the knife stuck quivering in the tent-post.

— The Burut Cakıp's stock has eaten our grass, he said. It has drunk our water, it has trampled our winter grounds. That is one. The second is this: for an exiled slave to raise a feast is to raise a claim to khanship. And the third is this: let no one say that I, Koçku, looked on while a shepherd grew fat.

That was the pretext; the intent was other. There was no plunder in Koçku's mind; plunder takes goods and leaves life. In his mind was the root: to dig the forty houses of the Kirghiz out by the root, to pour water on their hearths, and to carry off that child whose name was travelling from tongue to tongue, slung at the pommel of his saddle, a gift for Esenkan. He had seven standards raised; beneath the seven standards seven hundred riders formed their ranks. Armour was buckled on, quivers were filled, the points of the lances played in the sunlight like fish-scales. Koçku mounted his black stallion and cracked his whip.

— Put every male to the sword, he said. Drive the women and girls before you. Sweep off the herds, set fire to the yurts. But that child you bring to me alive. Alive, I say — that I may throw him before Esenkan with my own hand.

The seven hundred riders moved. The sound of hooves was first like rain, then like hail, then like rock breaking loose from the mountain. Birds took wing, deer started and swerved from their courses; the grass-buried silence of the steppe understood before anyone what it was that was coming.

At that hour, life in Cakıp's aul flowed on with its everyday slowness. The morning mist had only just lifted from the skirts of the Altay, and thin threads of smoke were rising from the roof-crowns of the felt yurts. The women were churning kımız at the leather sacks, the old men sat with their backs to the sun talking over yesterday. Çıyırdı was mending her son's patched çapan on her knee, and at every thrust of the needle a prayer passed through her heart. For twelve years she had never once left off that prayer; for twelve years her heart had hung suspended between joy and dread.

Manas that day was out in the open country again. He had only just entered his twelfth year; but he stood taller than a lad of fifteen, and his wrist had grown thick as a ram's horn. And he had a gaze — it seemed to read what passed within a man; when he laughed, the aul laughed, and when he knit his brows, even the old men broke off in mid-word. At times he was wilful and quarrelsome; there were days when he manhandled his playfellows, when he beat the Kalmuk boys and sent them home to their camps howling, and Cakıp would take his head between his hands and mutter, "This child will bring trouble down on us all." Çıyırdı never spoke ill of her son to anyone; only at night, while he slept, she would sit gazing at his face: the sleeping face was a child's face; but that other one who came when he woke — whose face was that? She could not tell. That day Manas was playing ordo with the shepherd boys of his own years; there was such a stroke in his knucklebone throw that the pieces of bone whirred like stones, and the children scattered, laughing. Beside him was Toruçaar: a dark bay colt, broad in the croup, his breath like a bellows — a colt of whom Akbaltay, on first seeing him, had said, "There is tulpar light in this animal's eye; this one came of no common herd."

Akbaltay had woken early that morning. Old age shortens sleep; but it was not old age that had woken him. In his dream he had seen a black cloud; the cloud was rising from behind the Altay, and within it, in place of lightning, swords were flashing. He came out of

his yurt, looked to the east, and listened to the earth. The earth was trembling with a far-off rumble.

— Cakıp, he said, send men to your herds. Let them turn the flocks back from the mountain's skirt today and keep them near.

— What is it, Akbaltay — has a wolf come down?

— Were it a wolf, I would rejoice, said Akbaltay. A wolf's belly can be filled. The rumble I hear has a belly that cannot.

The word had not yet fallen from his lips, the day had not yet reached noon, when a rider appeared on the mountain road. The horse was in a lather of foam, the shepherd on its back in a lather of blood. A lance-graze had laid open his shoulder, and he had left half his life along the road. In the middle of the aul he slid from the horse and fell, and from his mouth, mingled with blood, spilled a single word:

— Kalmuk... Seven standards... They are coming...

In an instant all was upheaval. The women gathered up the children, the old men hunted for quivers, the young men ran for the horses. Cakıp's face turned to ash; his wealth passed before his eyes, the years of exile passed, the old cruelty of the Kalmuk passed.

— We are forty houses, if that, he said, his hands trembling — and they are seven hundred. Let us draw off into the mountains, Akbaltay. Let the goods go, so the lives remain. There is no standing against the Kalmuk; we learned that on the road of exile.

Akbaltay gathered his white beard into his fist; his eyes were fixed on the plain in the distance where the dust-cloud had begun to swell.

— The runner's road ends one day, Cakıp, he said. The Kirghiz came to the Altay running; beyond the Altay there is nowhere left to run but death. Let him who would gather his men gather them; but know this: if we do not stand here today, tomorrow we shall stand nowhere.

While these words were being spoken, no one had thought of the child. But the child was there; back from the open country, he stood at the edge of the aul, listening. He looked at the wounded shepherd's blood; he looked at the wailing women; he looked at his father's ash-grey face. Something stirred within him — something that had slept for years, something that had never been named. Afterwards, when the manasçıs told of this moment, they always spoke the same words: blood came down into the child's eyes, and

when the blood came down the world showed red, and when the world showed red, the thing called fear departed from him for ever.

Manas leapt onto Toruçaar. He asked no one's leave, he spoke no word to anyone. Only, as he passed, he took the sword from the hands of an old retainer — it was the ancient sword kept in his father Cakıp's chest, never drawn from its sheath since the exile. When he gripped the hilt a strange thing happened: the sword seemed to cleave to his palm; flesh and iron knew each other, and would not be parted again. The boy did not even find it strange. It was as if for twelve years his hand had been waiting for this very hilt.

— Manas! cried Çıyırdı, as if she were being torn in two. My lamb, stop! They are seven hundred!

The boy turned and looked at his mother. He looked, and he smiled — and there was such a thing in that smile that Çıyırdı's words died in her throat.

— Mother, he said, what was spoken over me when my name was given — have you forgotten? I was not born to run.

And he touched Toruçaar with his heel. The colt — Toruçaar, who that day passed out of colthood and became a horse, and passed out of horsehood and became a tulpar — neighed, reared, and then shot forward like an arrow. Behind him fifteen or twenty young Kirghiz mounted and spurred after; but not one of them could catch him. The boy flew on ahead, alone, toward the swelling cloud of dust.

Koçku, when he saw the single rider coming out to meet him from the far end of the plain, first laughed.

— The Burut's wits are the measure of his goods, he said to those beside him. They have sent a child out against us. Take him, take him with the lasso — he is wanted alive.

Ten riders broke from the vanguard and fanned out toward the boy, loosening their lassos. Even the rearguard could not quite make out what happened. The bay horse leaned once to the right, once to the left; the sword rose once, fell once; and all ten of the ten horses came back empty. The arm of the man who threw the lasso was gone from the wrist; the lance of the man who thrust his lance was split like a straw. The boy was not shouting, was not speaking; only his sword spoke, and the sword's speech was short.

Then Koçku's laughter froze upon his face. He gave the sign to the seven hundred; the seven standards dipped as one, the seven hundred lances came down as one, and the steppe filled from end to end with the sound of hooves. And what came on against them was still a

single rider — but now he seemed single to no one. Afterwards those who survived told it under oath: a black cloud appeared above the child's head, they said; within the cloud a grey-maned wolf was seen, they said; on his right hand and his left forty çiltens rode, and before him walked a whirlwind, they said. Who can know; fear makes the eye see large. But this much was certain: when Toruçaar entered in among the seven hundred horses, what entered was not a child, but a scourge.

The sword struck to the right, and a rank went down; it struck to the left, and another rank. Manas's arm knew no tiring; for the iron cleaving to his palm seemed to rise and fall of itself, and the boy only gave it its direction. He bent low on the horse, straightened, wheeled; lances passed over him, arrows passed beside him; it was as if iron had sworn an oath not to touch him. The column of seven hundred split in two before one child; what split in two broke in three, what broke in three scattered. The Kalmuk riders trampled one another; he who would flee could not flee, for the man behind him still pressed forward; he who pressed forward could not advance, for the man before him was fleeing back.

Koçku, on his black stallion, watched the rout of his own men, and all the rage in his great body turned to a bellow. He swept up his shield, gripped his giant lance, and drove the stallion down upon the boy.

— You Burut whelp! he thundered. What is your name — let me have it cut on your gravestone!

The boy drew rein. The dust settled; two horses, two breaths, stood face to face. And then the boy spoke the words that had never yet been spoken on any field; his voice had not yet deepened, but the steppe carried it:

— My name is Manas. Learn it by heart; for from this day your seed shall hear that name in their dreams and wake.

Koçku hurled his lance; the lance passed by the boy's ear and drove into the earth, its shaft quivering. Toruçaar sprang forward. Koçku reached for his sword and never finished reaching; for the boy's sword was swifter than he. One stroke — a single stroke — and the head of the Kalmuk champion who could muster seven hundred riders parted from its body and fell into the grass of the steppe. The black stallion shied at its empty saddle and bolted.

The remnant who saw this knew neither standard nor command; he who could turn his horse's head turned it, and he who could not ran on foot. And as they fled, looking back

over their shoulders, they were all crying the same word; and that word echoed in the valleys, reached the border marches, and from there went out into the world:

— Manas! Manas is coming! Manas!

A name was heard, for the first time, as a scream of terror in the mouths of enemies. And the name's owner sat his halted horse in the middle of the plain, breathing hard, gazing at the sword that cleaved to his palm. Only then, as if it understood that the work was finished, did the sword softly loose itself from his hand.

✦ ✦ ✦

When they returned to the aul the day had slid toward late afternoon. Manas in front, behind him the young men come back alive, behind them the captured Kalmuk horses led on tethers, the gathered weapons, the seven toppled standards. The people of the aul had poured out onto the road; but at first no one could shout or rejoice, for they could not compass what they saw. What had gone out was a child; what returned — no one could find the word to name what returned.

Çıyırdı ran, clasped her son's knee, kissed his stirrup, searched his face and body with her hands: not a scratch, not one single scratch. The mother's heart first gave thanks; then — such is motherhood — it shuddered with a deeper fear: What rope will bind this child now, what word will hold him?

Cakıp looked at his son, and looked; his joy wrestled with his fear. At night, by the fire, he poured out his heart to Akbaltay:

— One half of me would slaughter a thanks-offering, Akbaltay. The other half trembles. Koçku was Esenkan's border warden. If the border warden's head has fallen to the ground, that head will be heard of in Beecin. Today we broke seven hundred; tomorrow seven thousand will come. And the day after, seventy thousand.

— You speak truly, said Akbaltay. But let me tell you something better than truth: what happened today was always going to happen. What is written in the dañza is not smothered in the cradle. Leave off your care for goods and take up your care for men. Send word abroad; however many Kirghiz households are scattered over the Altay, let us bind them to us by oath. Today we were forty houses; if forty houses with one child broke seven

hundred, what might four hundred houses not do? The lone tree knows no wind, the lone man knows no help.

That night in the aul there was mourning and there was the joy of living, both; the lament was raised for the three herdsmen fallen in the first clash of the raid, and the kımız of thanksgiving was drunk for those who came back alive. Manas sat beyond the fire, his arms about his knee, gazing into the flames. The old men kept their eyes from him; the children could not bring themselves to draw near him. Only Akbaltay came and lowered himself at his side, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

— Were you afraid today, son? he asked, gently.

The boy considered. The flames played in his eyes.

— I was not afraid, father, he said. But something happened, and I could not fathom it. When the sword cleaved to my hand, it was as if I were not I. As if someone born before me were working through my arm.

Akbaltay was silent a long while. Then, as if speaking to himself:

— The one born before you is your name, he said. The name is older than the man, son. When you were not yet in the cradle, your name was written in the ledger of Beecin. Today a leaf of that ledger stirred. For what comes after, may the heart hold fast.

The next morning Manas, asking no one, went round the yurts of the three fallen herdsmen one by one. One had a mother; one had a widow and two orphans; one had no kin at all, only a horse left with its hobble unloosed. At each hearth the boy knelt and bowed his head; he took the widow's orphans into his arms, and with his own hand he fed the kinless man's horse. He spoke no word; at his age words would in any case have sat ill. But that going-round passed from tongue to tongue in the aul, and that day many hearts were bound to him — not by fear, but by another thing: by the bond itself.

✦ ✦ ✦

Beecin was far; but the horse of fear does not tire. A handful of men from the rearguard who had slipped out of the rout rode three days and three nights, changing horses as they went, heeding neither mountain nor plain; at every station they entered they looked back over their shoulders, and in every cloud of dust they saw that child. When they passed

within the thick walls of Beecin there was no armour left on their bodies and no colour left in their faces.

Esenkan received them in his great encampment, on his high throne. On his right were ranged the great ones of the palace, on his left the lords of war; in the midst, their tongues cleaving to their palates, a handful of fugitives lay prostrate, trembling.

— Where is Koçku? said Esenkan. He went out with seven standards; I have not heard of seven standards returning.

— My khan, said one of them, without lifting his brow from the floor. Koçku's head lies in the grass of the Altay. Seven hundred men went out; we are those who could flee. What broke us was no army, my khan, no tümen; it was one single rider. It was a child, my khan. He rode a dark bay colt; the sword never left his hand — it was as if it were grown to his hand. When he came down upon us a black cloud walked above his head; what he broke was broken, what he slew was slain. And after those who fled came his name: Manas, they are saying, my khan. Manas.

The name rang through the throne-room like a sword. The lords looked at one another. Esenkan's face did not change; but his hand, resting on the gilded arm of the throne, slowly closed into a fist.

— Bring the book, he said.

They brought the dañza: black-bound, its corners worn smooth with handling, its lock of silver — the book of prophecy. The diviners, the counters of stars, the pourers of sand were summoned; the most ancient scholar of the palace opened the book with trembling hands, turned the yellowed leaves, turned them, and stopped at a place. He read; and as he read, his face whitened.

— Speak, said Esenkan. Do not turn the words about.

— My khan, said the old man, what is written is this: from the Burut a man of blood is born; his name is Manas. If he is not found in the cradle, he grows; if he grows, he comes to his twelfth year; when he comes to his twelfth year he rides out onto the field, and he wets his first sword in Kalmuk blood. For what comes after, the book says this: he who does not take Manas as a child shall not take him as a man; and he who cannot take him as a man shall not stand before him. — My khan, I have made the reckoning: Cakıp's son entered his twelfth year this year. Koçku's blood is the first blood in the book. The writing is confirmed, plain as day.

Not a breath was heard in the chamber. Esenkan rose from his throne; he walked to the window; he looked out beyond the walls, westward, into that measureless distance. Years ago, on account of this book, he had had the cradles of the Kirghiz searched and their women with child examined, and finding nothing, had driven Cakıp's camp to the end of the world. He had thought it enough. He had thought distance would be a shroud upon prophecy. It had not been.

— He who does not take him as a child, he said to himself, shall not take him as a man. Then we take him as a child.

He turned; his voice now was the voice of command:

— Summon Coloy. Summon Döñgö.

Coloy came: when he came, the doorway was too narrow for him. The strongman of the Kalmuk, who threw camels and toppled bulls, who at one sitting ate the flesh of a mare and drained nine skins of kımız — Coloy; his face black as a cauldron's, his voice as if it came from under the earth. Döñgö came: lean, tall as a pole, his eyes two embers; a man who spoke little, and when he spoke, spoke like an arrow. The two stood before the throne.

— You have heard, said Esenkan. In the Altay a Burut child has cut off the head of my border warden and broken seven hundred of my men. The book writes of him; and what the book writes, the world will talk of. It must be silenced before it talks. I am fitting out ten thousand men for you: ten thousand picked, ten thousand armoured, ten thousand well-fed. Go to the Altay; scatter Cakıp's aul; but your true task is this: bring that child to me alive. Alive, I said. His corpse is worthless to me; the dead man's name grows, the living man's knee bends. Let me see him at the foot of this throne, in chains, that I may close the book and sleep.

Coloy laughed; his laughter was like the booming of an empty barrel.

— My khan, he said, you give ten thousand men for one child; I will tuck that child into my sash and bring him. He broke a flock of seven hundred; a flock is a flock — without its shepherd it breaks. But Coloy is no flock.

Döñgö said nothing. Only, he looked into the face of the old man who held the dañza; he saw the thing in the old man's eyes, and into his heart there fell a doubt to which he gave no name. But doubt is slave and bondsman beside command; he was silent, and bowed his head.

The army of ten thousand was fitted out in three weeks. The smiths of Beecin worked the bellows night and day; they shaved arrows, ground lance-heads, wove armour. The storehouses were opened, the camels were loaded; cauldrons, tents, remounts, herd upon herd of slaughter-stock were strung out along the road. As the host went out from the city the people stood on the walls to watch; standards, banners, a forest of spears passed and kept passing; the passing took half a day. At the very front rode Coloy, on a horse like a mountain, with his own mountain of a body; beside him Döñgö, lean and silent. At the army's setting-out the drums were beaten; the sound of the drums was festival in Beecin, but as that sound travelled west toward the steppe it would change, and in the ear of any Kirghiz who heard it, it would become the drone of death.

The army marched. Station by station, well by well, pass by pass; the moon was born anew, thinned, and was born again. On the road, Coloy's appetite became a byword through the army: at every halt the largest of the slaughter-beasts went into his cauldron; he ate, and eating laughed, and laughing boasted. At one halt, by the fire, he baited Döñgö:

— Why so silent, you dry pole? Or do you too fear the child?

— I do not fear the child, said Döñgö, without taking his eyes from the fire. I fear what is written in the book. Koçku also went out with seven hundred riders; his laughter also was as loud as yours.

Coloy's laughter broke off in the middle; then it was covered over with a louder roar. But that night Coloy too saw in his dream a dark shape drawing near on a bay horse, and woke sweating; he told no one. Had anyone watched from afar, he would have likened that dark shape spreading along the horizon to a black cloud rising from the earth and walking slowly toward the Altay: dust before it, smoke behind it, and its belly full of iron.

✦ ✦ ✦

While that cloud was still on the road, its shadow fell upon the Altay. First the hunters along the border sensed strange things: a stirring in the Kalmuk stations, a thickening on the caravan roads. Then, one midnight, a Kalmuk herdsman who had kin among the Kirghiz set his life at nothing and rode to Cakıp's aul; he was taken into Akbaltay's yurt and given kımız to bring back his breath.

— An army has risen from Beecin, he said. Ten thousand, they say. At its head are Coloy and Döñgö. Esenkan has said, "Bring the child alive." Your time runs until the snows close the passes; after that the road is shut — but by spring they will be here.

When the news went round the aul, some of the women wept, and some of the men's knees gave way. Ten thousand! The number itself was like an army; wherever it was spoken it tightened the breath. Cakıp did not leave his yurt for a day and a night; when he came out his eyes had sunk into their hollows, but his back — everyone saw it — was straight for the first time since the exile.

— I was the slave of my goods, he said to the gathered elders. Fear for my goods bent me for years. Now I have understood: the one thing that guards both goods and life is union. What Akbaltay said, that is the truth. Send out word; wherever in the Altay, wherever in the Çüy, a Kirghiz hearth still smokes, let a messenger go. Let them say: Cakıp's son Manas has come out onto the field; he has taken Koçku's head; now Esenkan comes with ten thousand. Let him who would flee, flee; let him who would die, come to us. For we are not running any more.

The messengers flew to the four quarters. And from the valleys of the Altay, from hidden winter grounds, from scattered solitary camps, drop by drop, people began to seep in: some three riders, some ten households; one with a rust-eaten sword left him by his grandfather, another with nothing but his heart. They came, and they swore the oath; the oath was after the old fashion: a white sheep was slaughtered, they leapt the sword, and it was said, "Let him who turns back be craven; let the hearth of him who turns back go out." Forty houses became a hundred, a hundred houses two hundred; every man who came wished to look once upon that child, and having looked, sat down in his place with a strange stillness. It was as if the men came not for the count, but for that gaze. Among them was an old bard; one evening by the fire he took up his kopuz and made to set the rout of Koçku to melody there and then. Akbaltay smiled and raised his hand: "Too soon," he said; "the epic that is sung while its owner is still a child is left half-made. Be patient; the grandsons of your grandsons will sing this child's song." The bard fell silent; but the melody, once born, did not die of being silenced; all winter long it kept seeping into the lullabies of the women and the whistling of the herdsmen.

Manas in those days spoke little and worked much. In the mornings he poured the young men out onto the plain, set them galloping, throwing the lasso, loosing the bow; he let no hand grow slack, and he himself went to the fore and did double what any other did.

In the evenings he sat at Akbaltay's knee and listened to the old days: the true homeland of the Kirghiz in the Ala-Too, the waters of the Talas, the graves of the forefathers, the grief of the exile. And as he listened, something gathered within the boy; a thing deeper than rage, wider than longing.

— Father, he said one evening, this Coloy they speak of — what manner of man is he?

— A strongman, they call him, said Akbaltay. His body is like a hill; at one sitting he eats a horse, and when he rises the ground shakes, they say. His strength is brute strength; but brute strength is strength too, son — do not hold it light. Döñgö is another matter; he speaks little and sees much. It is not Coloy's wrist that frightens me, it is Döñgö's eye.

— Ten thousand men, said Manas, gazing into the flames. I have seen seven hundred; ten thousand I have not seen. Many, they say. Father, seen from where the wolf watches the flock, a thousand sheep and one sheep are one.

Akbaltay looked long into the boy's face. Then, hiding the shiver within him, he laughed:

— And the wolf, mind you, must be wiser than the flock, son. Your heart is a mountain; but even a mountain needs a road. Be patient, think, listen. The true man whets his mind before his sword.

One night Çıyırdı, patching her son's çapan, stilled her needle and asked Cakıp, who sat across from her, very softly: "Did we raise this child, or is he raising us?" Cakıp could not answer; he looked into the embers of the hearth, and looked, and then for the first time in his life he counted not his goods but his son, and the counting was done in a single word. They both fell silent; outside, the wind slid the first cold of the coming winter in under the skirt of the felt.

Winter pressed against the door. The first snow whitened the peaks of the Altay, then covered the lower slopes, then closed the passes one by one. Under the snow the aul drew breath and drew taut at once: they knew that the snow was a reprieve, not a pardon. In the winter camps swords were whetted, bowstrings renewed, horses fed on barley; the women dried kurut, the meat was cured; and by night the watch never failed. Çıyırdı saw her son grow a finger's breadth taller every morning, and boiled her joy and her dread in the same cauldron. Cakıp for the first time poured out his wealth without stinting, giving stock to every poor household that came.

— Goods, it seems, were for the black day all along, he would say to those who marvelled. I learned it at sixty; you learn it while you are young.

And far off, on the southern roads the snow had not yet taken, the black cloud moved on. Coloy tipped over cauldrons at the halting places and ate his meat, shaking the tents with his laughter, boasting, "I will bring that child in my sash." Döñgö, by night, would come out of his tent and gaze north at the stars, telling no one of the nameless doubt within him.

One evening, as the sun set blood-red — not behind the Ala-Too but behind the Altay — Manas climbed alone to the hill above the aul. Below, the roof-crown smoke of the yurts was rising, children's voices drifted up, somewhere a mother was singing a lullaby. He looked to the south: there the clouds were piled black on black, as if they were the heralds of what was coming. He drew his sword; the iron took the red of the dying day.

— Come, he said, and only the steppe heard his voice. Seven hundred came, and seven hundred lay down. Come, ten thousand. The days of the Kirghiz running are over; from now on it is you who will do the counting.

He slid the sword into its sheath, mounted his horse, and rode down to the light of the hearths. That night everyone in the aul went early to their beds; only the eyes of the watchmen, fixed on the darkness of the snow-sealed passes, never closed until spring.

CHAPTER 3

Victory over Coloy and the Raising of the Khan

— ❖ —

The black tidings came mingled with the snow. A hunter riding down from the northern passes of the Altay, his horse's mouth white with foam, plunged into the aul on the hillside and cried out: ten thousand riders, ten thousand black hoods, ten thousand lances were coming, shrouding the sun in dust. Coloy rode at their head, they said; a man like a mountain, the horse beneath him bigger than a horned camel, his shield as broad as a millstone. Döñgö was at his side, Kaman the champion behind him; Esenkan's decree lay folded in his breast: bring the bloody Burut's child in alive, and burn his aul until not even its ashes can be known.

That day a silence fell upon the forty households of the Kırgız, a silence heavier than the silence of snow. The women withdrew behind the felt doors, the children swallowed

their voices, even the dogs forgot how to bark. Only the horse herds stamped and wheeled on the plain; the beast scents approaching blood before the man does.

Before evening a council was gathered in Akbaltay's grey yurt. The white beards ranged themselves around the hearth, the bowls of kımız forgotten in their hands. Cakıp sat farthest back; his face was like an autumn leaf caught out in the middle of winter. He spoke first, and his voice came out trembling:

— Elders, brothers... I came to this Altay an exile; I came naked, I came hungry. In forty years I have heaped up wealth, I have spread my herds until my cattle covered the hills. Now ten thousand riders are coming. Ten thousand! Count our men and they do not reach a hundred. Where are the arms to hold a sword, how many are the chests to serve as shields? Let us give up half the wealth, let us pour the silver ingots out before them, and if we must... — here his throat knotted, but he dragged the words back up from where he had swallowed them — if we must, let us give of our daughters as tribute. Let us bow the head before Coloy and keep our lives. Wealth can be found again; a life cannot.

Akbaltay gazed long into the hearth. He seemed to be reading something in the fire; perhaps he read the days gone by, perhaps the days to come. Then slowly he nodded:

— Cakıp speaks truly, he said. I too would wish to fight, had my arm any strength left in it. But reason exists to shut the mouth of the heart. A hundred men against ten thousand is a lamb set against the wolf. Let us give tribute, let us pour out fair words, let us save the day. He who stays alive takes his vengeance one day. The dead have no vengeance.

So the words went round; the bowl passed from hand to hand as the talk passed from mouth to mouth, and in every mouth it bent a little lower, shrank a little smaller. Just then the threshold creaked, the felt of the door was flung aside, and Manas came in with the cold. He had only just turned twelve, yet his shoulders filled the height of the doorway; his gaze was like black water running beneath the ice — still above, deep below. Not a season had passed since he wiped Koçku's blood from his sword. He walked to the very middle of the council, asked no one for a place, bowed his head to no one.

— I heard your words from the threshold, he said. Let us give our girls, you have said. Let us give our wealth, you have said. Let us bow the head, you have said.

Cakıp stretched out his hand toward his son:

— My child, you are still a boy, and the tongue of the council is a heavy thing...

— Am I a boy? — Manas's voice shook the felt of the yurt. — I was a boy when Koçku came too. He came with seven hundred riders, and seven hundred saddles went back empty. Father, you count your wealth; I count our honor. The girl you speak of is my sister, my elder sister; shall I lay her in the Kalmuk's bosom as tribute? The wealth you speak of is four-legged fortune; He who gives fortune takes life also. But honor, once it has gone, does not come back. Hear me, white beards: better to die fighting for one day than to live a hundred years in fear. I will not bow my head to Coloy. Bow yours if you will; I shall go out alone to meet him, and if my sword breaks I will fight with my teeth, and if my teeth break, with my bones.

The fire crackled in the hearth; there was no other sound. Akbaltay looked into the boy's face, and looked, and in that face he saw not his own youth but something he had never seen: a thing that did not know how to be defeated. Slowly he straightened himself and tightened his sash:

— Nogoy's blood has not dried, he said. I was wrong. Old age shows a man death as a friend and makes him forget shame. Let us fight. If we die, we shall lie beneath the snow; the snow of the Altay is whiter than the Kalmuk's threshold.

As the council broke up, Cakıp followed his son out to the threshold. He meant to say something and could not; he laid his hand on his son's shoulder, and the shoulder was like stone. — Your mother waits for you, was all he said. Manas took his father's hand, kissed it and pressed it to his brow: — Father, he said, I know you grieve for your wealth; do not be angry at my words. You know better than I what exile is; perhaps I am unafraid only because I do not know. But this I do know: a neck that has bent once bends more easily the second time. I will not bend this neck, and I will not bend it even for your life's sake; so that your son may never be remembered as the father of slaves. Cakıp swallowed in the darkness; all the weariness of forty years of exile settled upon him in a single moment, and for the first time he felt, inside his fear, the stirring of something else, a pride that had no name yet.

That night forty hearths in forty households burned until morning. Swords were whetted, strings were fitted to bows, arrowheads were quenched in water over the red coals. The women pinned to their men's collars amulets sewn with verses and prayers. Çıyırdı bound her son's armor with her own hands; at every knot she spoke a prayer, at every prayer she swallowed once, but she did not weep. A mother's heart weeps, a mother's eye does not; if it weeps, misfortune falls upon the son.

Before the sky paled, Manas pressed his face to Toruçaar's mane. Horse and boy had been born on the same day; they knew each other's breath as though they had suckled from one milk.

— Today is our day, the two of us, said Manas. Do not stumble, and I shall not fail.

Toruçaar pawed the snow with his foreleg and turned up the black earth beneath. Those who saw it read it as a good omen: the horse finds the homeland under the snow, they said.

✦ ✦ ✦

When Coloy's army came in sight, the day had reached mid-morning. At first they took it for a grey cloud on the horizon; the cloud drew nearer and became dust; the dust drew nearer and became horse and iron. Ten thousand riders spread across the white slopes of the Altay like a black flood. Their drums boomed, their horns howled; the sound echoed nine times in the mountains and nine times came back, as though the mountains themselves refused to hold it.

The vanguard was drawn up behind Döñgö. Döñgö was a swarthy champion; he carried his own standard and trusted it to no man. When he saw fewer than a hundred riders drawn up against the forty households of the Kırgız, he let loose his laughter:

— Is this the Burut? — he thundered. — A handful of lice, a sack of bones! Was it for this that Esenkan wearied ten thousand men? Stand aside; I will drive them off alone!

And drive he did. He spurred his black horse and sprang forward; the vanguard broke loose behind him. In the Kırgız line the bows groaned with one voice, and the rain of arrows mowed down the first rank; but Döñgö came on carrying the arrows in his shield, and the nearer he came the larger he grew.

Manas met him in the middle of the field. When the two horses crashed chest against chest, the earth shook; lance met lance, both shattered, and they reached for their swords. Döñgö's sword fell heavily, and the air whined at every stroke; Manas's was supple as a snake, quick as an eye. Three times they circled the field, three times they parted, three times they closed again. On the third, Manas pressed Toruçaar over to the left with his knees, Döñgö's sword swept through emptiness, and into that emptiness the young sword came down faster than hail. The helm on Döñgö's head split in two, and with the helm the

body poured from the saddle. The man like a mountain toppled like a mountain onto the snow; where he fell, the snow was crushed down to the black earth beneath. His standard flew from his hand, its pole snapped.

A murmur rose from the forward ranks; the Kalmuk soldiery, seeing their own champion fall, reined back their horses for the first time. In that instant a war cry burst from the Kırgız line, and the men of the forty households charged, and behind them the shepherd, the hunter, the boy whose lip had not yet known a moustache. They were few, but to be few in a narrow pass is a craft in itself; Akbaltay had spread them along the two slopes and drawn the enemy into the throat of the ravine. Ten thousand are strong in the open; in a strait place a multitude becomes its own enemy: the horses tangled together, the lances locked upon one another, and those who came behind trampled those in front.

Seeing this, Coloy pulled his army back and had a field cleared. He rode forward himself; his horse was no horse but some monstrous thing, and from under the snow where it trod came the sound of stone. As for Coloy himself... the knees of any who beheld him went loose. His head was big as a cauldron, his hands broad as shovels, his voice seemed to come from beneath the earth. He halted in the middle of the field, raised his shield, and bellowed:

— Where is that mad boy they call Çoñ Cindi? Whichever arm it was that cut down Koçku, let it come forth! If he was born a man, let him come man to man; I am Coloy, the balban of the Kalmuk, and no man has risen alive from under me!

— I am the one you seek! — said Manas, and rode out from the line.

When Coloy saw a child coming, he laughed at first; then his laughter broke off midway, for he had seen the child's eyes. In those eyes there was no trace of fear, and the fearless eye lay outside everything a balban had ever known.

Both hosts held their breath. On one side a boy of twelve, on the other a giant twice the size of the one who faced him; the snow between them stretched like a white fate. Çıyırdı watched from above, from the ridge where the women stood, and did not close her eyes; a mother must be able to look upon her son's death, so that the son may be deathless — so said the ancients.

They closed. First with the lance: Coloy's lance pierced Manas's shield and glanced off his shoulder-armor; Manas's shattered on Coloy's shield. Then with the sword: as the swords clashed, sparks poured onto the snow like crimson stars. Then the horses were let go

and they set to wrestling; the two champions came grip to grip at the sash. Coloy strove to lift the boy and dash him to the earth, and could not; it was like pulling at a plane tree whose roots ran deep. Manas shook him once, shook him twice, and at the third Coloy's knee sank into the snow. The army of ten thousand saw it, and from ten thousand mouths came a single strangled sound; never until that day had the Kalmuk seen their balban brought to his knee.

It was then that Coloy did what does not become a man. From his breast he drew the rain-stone hidden in a grey leather thong; that stone whose magic is an inheritance of the Kalmuk shamans — it fouls the air, it drags the sky down to the earth. He muttered over the stone in his palm, breathed on it, and struck it upon the snow. In an instant the world whitened and went dark; a storm broke, turned to blizzard, and eye could not see eye. Whether snow was falling or the sky itself was being flung about, none could tell. Manas cast his lasso, and the lasso went wide; he swung his sword, and the sword cut fog. Out of the storm came only the muffled sound of Coloy's horse drawing away — and, some later swore to it, a groan besides: for Manas's last stroke had not gone wholly astray, but had licked across the balban's back. Coloy had fled into the blizzard so that the snow might cover his blood, and had barely carried off his life.

The storm died as suddenly as it had broken. When the field opened again, Coloy was gone, but his army stood, and at its head now was Kaman the champion. Kaman was a fighter stubborn as the wild boar whose name he bore; he was neither proud like Döñgö nor a sorcerer like Coloy — he only fought, and fought until he died. He split his men into three columns and hurled all three forward at once.

The rest of that day those who told of it afterward told always in the same words: katı müşkül, çoñ soguş — hard, tangled, a great battle. No war cries then, no display; a grappling throat to throat and tooth to tooth. Akbaltay drew his bow heedless of his years, and the arrows he loosed did not miss. Even Cakıp — even Cakıp who trembled for his wealth — took up a club and broke it over a Kalmuk's head. The day rolled past noon, rolled past mid-afternoon; the snow was dyed crimson, and the crimson darkened. Three times Kaman the champion strove to reach Manas, three times his way was barred; the fourth time he reached him, and met Manas's sword. It was not brief and it was not easy; but in the end Kaman too went down, and even as he fell he did not loose his sword — they pried it from his corpse.

Toward evening the Kırgız line broke for a moment; the young men on the left slope gave ground, and the Kalmuk poured in through the gap. Akbaltay, seeing it, drove his horse into the breach, his white beard smeared with blood, his voice worn to a rasp: — Children of Nogoy! he cried. — Your mothers are behind you; what lies at your backs is no homeland that you may retreat into it — at your backs is the abyss! The young men halted, turned, and the breach closed faster than it had opened.

When the head is gone, the body scatters. In the dusk of evening the army of ten thousand dissolved into rout; but the Altay gives no road to the fleeing. As night came down, the sky itself blackened; Esenkan's soldiers knew no pass and knew no trail, and on the slopes where they were driven the blizzard found them. Some went over the precipices; some froze where they stood in the snow, stiffened fast against the flanks of their horses. That night the snow of the Altay swallowed an army and drew the cover over it; until spring, no one knew what lay beneath. Those who escaped were a handful; among them a huge champion called Döödür had turned his horse's head toward Beecin and was vanishing into the night, carrying the black news to Esenkan.

Those who returned to the Kırgız aul were not few, but neither were they whole. Seventeen men did not return; in seventeen households the hearth burned low that night. This is what they call victory: one eye laughing, one eye bleeding. Manas went from house to house of the seventeen who had not returned, knelt at every threshold, kissed the hand of every mother. — Their blood is a trust laid upon me, he said; this debt is mine, and when I die it passes to my son, and from my son to his.

✦ ✦ ✦

On the seventh day after the victory, the forty households of the Kırgız came together, and on that day the forty households ceased to be forty households. Akbaltay stepped into the midst and raised his hand:

— Since Nogoy Khan we have been without a head, he said. Being headless, we bowed the neck; we were exiled; we were scattered. God has given us a man; his years are a child's, but his deeds are greater than a khan's. It was he who cut down Koçku, he who felled Döñgö, he who put Coloy to flight. My word is my word: let us raise Manas as khan!

— Let us raise him! — said the forty of the forty households with one mouth; and that single voice rang out fuller than the war cry of an army of ten thousand, for there was no fear in it.

There were some who objected first; such is the law, and no matter is settled by a single voice. An aged bey, one of Nogoy's line who hoped for a share, said: — Can a khan be made of a child? He has no beard, he has no council. Akbaltay turned to him: — A beard grows on a goat as well, he said; khanship grows from the heart. Did you ever stand in the path of ten thousand riders, that you should put your beard forward? The bey fell silent; and when none were left unsilenced, the matter passed to the law.

Those who knew the rite performed the rite. From the herd a barren grey mare was chosen, her head drawn toward the qibla, and she was offered up; that her blood might not lie black upon the snow, it was let into opened earth, and her flesh boiled in forty cauldrons and shared out to forty households. Then a white felt was spread upon level ground; the white felt on the snow lay like cream upon milk. They seated Manas in the middle of the white felt. From the four sides four white-bearded elders took the four corners of the felt — one was Akbaltay, one was Cakıp; the father's hands were trembling, but this time not from fear. They lifted him. Once... — and the men and women of the forty households thundered with one mouth: khan! Twice... — khan! Three times... — khan! Three times they raised him, three times they lowered him, and all three times the sky gave back the echo.

Then Akbaltay brought out from the deepest chest of his yurt the thing that had lain wrapped in felt for forty years: the sky-grey standard come down from Nogoy. When they went out into exile he had torn it from its pole so that none should see it, and had carried it in his breast; for forty years, at every migration, it had been his heaviest load — its weight lighter than a feather, its meaning heavier than a mountain. The standard was bound to the tip of a new pole and raised. The grey-maned standard shivered once in the frost of the Altay, then found the wind and streamed out full. The old ones who saw it could not bear it; they wept, and did not hide their weeping. The standard lowered forty years before had risen again to the sky; exile did not end in that moment, but in that moment it died.

That day a feast was held; a feast unseen in the forty years of exile. The cauldrons boiled, kımız flowed like a spring flood, the kopuz never once seemed likely to fall silent before midnight. The young men set to wrestling, the horses were loosed to race; a small boy, a boy whose tongue had only just learned to turn, caught up words from the mouths

of his elders and spoke the first praise ever spoken in Manas's name, and everyone laughed, and some wiped their eyes as they laughed. Only in passing before the seventeen houses did the voices drop, the bowls come down, the heads bow; grief sat within the feast like salt within the kımız — a little, but always there.

Manas rose to his feet, and the twelve-year-old khan gave his first decree:

— Beneath this standard no lie shall be spoken, no orphan made to weep, no guest laid down hungry. Whoever grinds down the helpless shall find me before him first. And one word more: this standard shall not stand planted here, in a foreign land. It shall go to the homeland of my fathers, to the Ala-Too, to the waters of the Talas. Let it be sworn.

— Let it be sworn! — said the forty households; and the oath settled upon every head, each one separately, like a flake of snow.

In those days, one morning, Manas had ridden out early to look over the herds. At the edge of the plain he saw a solitary figure: an old man on a grey donkey, in a grey robe, his white beard falling to his chest. No one had come from that direction and no one was going that way; on the snow there was not even the donkey's track. Manas rode up and gave greeting. The old man returned it and fixed his eyes on the boy's face; those eyes were like the sky, their depths past seeing.

— You have been made khan, he said. The felt has lifted you. And you — do you know yet what you will lift?

— My homeland, said Manas. My people, the orphan, the stranger.

— Your sword is sharp, your wrist is iron, said the old man. But a sword one day grows blunt, a wrist one day grows tired. Desire what does not blunt and does not tire. Know the Creator, lean upon the Creator; give thanks when He gives, endure when He takes. Be a bridge for your people: let them cross over you, and when you grow weary, do not complain. And do not forget this — write it upon your breast: the life of tyranny is forty days, and on the forty-first day the reckoning is called.

Manas got down from his horse and bent to kiss the old man's hand. He bent — and where the hand had been there was only frost. When he straightened, the plain was empty; no donkey, no robe, no track. Only where the old man had stood the snow had melted, a palm's breadth of black earth lay bare, and from the earth a thin steam was rising. Manas gazed long into that emptiness, and then felt something washed within him, as though a river had passed through him, as though he had made the great ablution. It was Kızır, he

understood afterward; the one they call Kıdır, the saint who comes with his white beard to the side of those in extremity. When he returned to the aul that day, there was a light in his face that Çıyırdı knew the moment she saw it:

— Light has touched my child, she said, and fell down in the prostration of thanks.

✦ ✦ ✦

When that winter had passed and summer was on the move, a restlessness dropped into Manas like a wolf into the fold; neither kımız could quiet it nor the hunt beguile it. He opened his heart to Akbaltay:

— Father, he said, I have never seen the Ala-Too. You say Talas, and you weep; you say Keñ-Kol, and you fall silent. How shall I long for a homeland I have never seen, and how shall I take what I do not long for? Show me the road: let me go and see it. And they say too that at At-Başı there is Koşoy — great Koşoy, friend of bread and salt to my father's father. Let me go to him, kiss his hand, take of his wisdom.

Akbaltay's eyes laughed:

— He who goes to Koşoy does not come back empty, he said. He is the last standing pillar of the Kırgız; we melted away in exile, he held his ground. Go, my child. But go with few riders; a crowd becomes news for the Kıtay's watchers.

Cakıp at first would not have it; what business has a son who has been made khan upon the roads, he said, the Kıtay's eye is behind every stone. But Çıyırdı touched her husband's arm: — Let him go, she said. The bird does not build the nest before it has seen the nest. And Cakıp, hearing in his wife's voice that old voice of the days before exile, fell silent.

Manas took six warriors with him, mounted Toruçaar, and set his road to the south. The road was long: three days they crossed mountains, three days they passed desert, three days they rode along water. Where they passed they were guested; in some camps they hid their names, in some camps there was no longer any need — the news of the battle in the Altay had traveled faster than the wind, and the ten thousand riders the snow of the forty households had buried had grown, from mouth to mouth, to a hundred thousand. A white-bearded shepherd, offering kımız, looked long into Manas's face: — Are you the one? he asked. Manas said: — Which one? The shepherd said: — The one who was foretold, and

said nothing more; he offered the kımız, laid his hand on his breast, and turned back to his flock. The Altay fell away behind them; before them, one by one, opened the places whose names they knew from songs. And one morning, as dawn broke, a white-toothed line appeared along the horizon: it was not yet the Ala-Too itself, but a far arm of it, its herald; yet Manas drew rein and for a long time said no word. Then he said only this:

— So this is what it was. So a man can long even for a place he has never seen.

When they came to At-Başı there was no need to ask for Koşoy's dwelling; everyone pointed to the white orda in the middle of the plain and the hundreds of grey yurts pitched around it. Koşoy met them at the threshold. He was past seventy, but his bearing was the bearing of a crag; his shoulders held the doorposts on either side, his white beard reached his sash. Manas dismounted and walked; Koşoy walked too; midway they embraced. The old man wrapped the boy in one arm, then drew back and looked into his face, and looked:

— Cakıp's son, he said. Nogoy's grandson. We have heard of you, my son; the wind blowing from the Altay carried your name even here. They said Koçku, and we did not believe; they said Coloy, and we believed — for the wind does not lie, and does not bring the same news twice.

Three days and three nights they were guested. Sheep were slaughtered, kımız was drawn, and from distant auls the beys of Koşoy's circle came to look upon the young khan. But it was not feasting that Manas had come for; at night, when all had scattered, he would sit close at Koşoy's knee and ask: how is a homeland lost, how is it won back; what is the Kıtay's strength, what his weakness; what does one they call khan hold fast, and what does he let go. And Koşoy would tell him; he built his words slowly, like laying stone upon stone.

On the third night Manas asked:

— Father, they speak of the strength of your arm, yet one story of yours they always leave half told. They say Bilerik, and they fall silent. Who is Bilerik?

Koşoy looked into the hearth a while. Outside, the wind was feeling at the felt of the yurt.

— I will tell it to you, he said at last, because you will need it on your road. But know that this story is not drunk like kımız; it is swallowed like a stone. If it lodges in your throat, do not try to bring it up; let it stay. Listen.

And he told it; as the embers of the hearth died down no one rose to lay on wood, and the darkness wrapped itself about the telling like felt:

— There was a khan of ours they called Aydaröö; he had a son, Bilerik by name. What a true warrior is — he was that: full in his word, fearless in his eye, open in his hand. In those years the Kıtay was pressing the border, and whomever they found who bore the name of a man, they either broke or bound. They surrounded Bilerik on his way home from a wedding, five riders at his side; they surrounded him with five hundred, my son. The five fought and fell; Bilerik's horse they brought down with arrows, and himself they took alive, casting lasso upon lasso. Alive is what they had wanted, for Esenkan's dungeon-keepers feared the living, and what they feared they loved to see crawl in the pit.

— They carried him deep into the interior, to the stone dungeon. What I call a dungeon is a well beneath the earth: its floor wet, its walls slick, at the top a hole through which the sky shows no bigger than a dish. Down through it once a day they throw dry bread, and once a day they look: to see whether he has died. Bilerik did not die. Not the first month, not the second. The Kıtay marveled; and marveling, they made a game. They said: let us set this Burut to fight, for a spectacle for the dungeon-keepers. Twelve days, my son... twelve days, each day they hauled him out of that well and set him in the yard, and against him each day a different executioner, a different balban, some days they loosed two at once. He was unarmed; what came to his hand was a broken staff or a knife snatched from his enemy. Twelve days he fought alone. He went down, he got up; he bled, he dried; every evening he was thrown back into the well, every morning drawn out again. On the twelfth day, the last man they loosed against him stopped in the middle of the yard and would not fight. And if you ask why: he had seen his eye. An executioner can kill a man whose eye has died; from the man whose eye is alive, even the executioner is afraid.

Koşoy fell silent, took a swallow of kımız, went on:

— When the news reached us I still counted as young; I was twice the age you are now. Aydaröö came to my door and laid his white beard on the ground: who will take my son back from the Kıtay, he said. He had gone first to those who were khans, to those who were beys; one asked for wealth, one asked for time, one simply fled. By the time he came to me his hope was spent; and the request of a man without hope is not a request, it is a testament. We took him back, my son. How we took him is a long story; some nights we rode, some days we poured out words, in forty days we arrived, at forty places we drew breath, and at the last we came up against the dungeon itself. At its gate we fought, too; in

that fight two of my companions remained, their names are written in me, at every offering I speak them. When we drew him out of the well he was past knowing: his hair matted to felt, his body bone. But do you know what his first word to me was? "Koşoy aga," he said, "my horse is still with them; let us take my horse back too." — Koşoy's white beard trembled; whether it was laughter or weeping could not be told. — That is what a man is. He is the one who says: the dungeon may take the body, the honor stays with me.

Manas was staring into the red embers of the hearth; his fists were clenched on his knees, his jaw locked. Koşoy studied his face in the light of the coals, and then said what he had truly meant to say:

— Do you know why I have told you this, my son? Bilerik was one man; today in the dungeons of the Kıtay lie a thousand Bileriks. Some of our stock, some of other stock; at the bottom of the well no one asks your stock. And our land, these forty years in the Altay, is that same well grown wide: a dungeon open to the sky. You have been raised khan; the felt lifted you to the sky, they say. The felt lifts, my son; what holds is the oath. I have heard your oath: the exile shall end, you said. Let me add one word to it; carry it in your breast: the exile shall end, the captives shall go free, the standard shall be planted at Talas. These three are one; if one is left undone, all three become a lie. The Ala-Too waits for you. And I no longer count the days to my death, but the days to your coming.

Manas rose to his feet. In the middle of the yurt, at the head of the hearth, he laid his right hand on his breast:

— Father, he said, and his voice was low, but everyone in the yurt heard it, and years afterward they still said they had heard it. — Upon Nogoy's standard, upon the blood of the grey mare, upon the white felt that raised me, let the oath be sworn: I will end the exile. I will bring up those in the wells. I will plant the standard at Talas. If I fail in this, let my name not remain; let them not call me Manas.

Koşoy stood, took the boy's head in both hands, kissed his brow:

— May it be accepted, he said. The blessing I have given no one in forty years, I have given to you.

The next morning they set out. Koşoy escorted his guests to the edge of the plain; at parting he had a full quiver of arrows bound to Manas's saddle, arrows shaved by his own hand. — These do not miss, he said; on the day my hand wavered, I did not carve. Manas turned and looked one last time: the old man sat his horse, his white beard in the wind,

gazing after them; behind him the plain of At-Başı, and behind the plain, far in the distance, with its snowy ridges, the homeland itself.

They turned north, back toward the Altay. The road home seemed shorter than the road out; it is always so — the road of a man who has taken up an oath grows short, because his mind arrives before he does. At one halt, in the night, the youngest of the six warriors drew close to Manas: — My khan, he said, I keep thinking of that well Koşoy ata told of. Twelve days... Whether I could endure one day, I do not know. Manas was looking at the stars: — Neither did Bilerik, he said. No one knows, before the day comes. That is why oaths are sworn; an oath is the word you give in place of the day you do not know.

All along the road Manas spoke little; something like an arrow was drawn taut within him, waiting for the day of its loosing. He did not know that the day was nearer than he supposed: while they were swearing oaths in the south, in Beecin a champion knelt before Esenkan, numbering one by one the ten thousand buried in the snow of the Altay; and the Kıtay, its ledgers opened, was rolling a new black cloud toward the aul of forty households. As they neared the Altay the sky came down lower, the wind hardened; Toruçaar neighed without cause and pricked his ears to the north. Manas stroked his horse's neck:

— You have heard it too, he said. They are coming. Let them come.

CHAPTER 4

The Altay Wars

— ❖ —

Winter entered the ninety-gated palace of Beecin with fear before it entered with frost. Döödür the champion arrived having changed three horses on the road and burst the heart of the fourth before the gate; the clasps of his armor were torn away, the gilt of his helm had flaked off, the rime of the Altay clung to his beard. The palace spies who saw him looked at one another: this Döödür was a man like a mountain — strike his shoulder and it rang like stone; now that mountain was panting like a startled colt. He crossed the marble halls, thrust apart the gold-worked curtains, dropped to his knees before Esenkan's throne, and spoke without lifting his head from the floor.

— My khan, he said, I bring black news from the Altay. A child has risen from among the Kırgız; they call him Çoñ Cindi, they call him the Great Madman. That one they call mad has mown down the champions you sent as a reaper mows grain. Döñgö is fallen, Kaman the champion has gone into the earth, the column of ten thousand lies buried in the snow of the Altay. Coloy himself — that cauldron-bellied Coloy who eats the portion

of forty men — fouled the air with his rain-stone and barely carried off his life. He fled wounded, my khan; the giant, I say, fled wounded.

Esenkan did not stir upon his throne. Only his fingers, slowly, crumpled the silk kaftan upon his knee. A child. A mad child. Ten thousand soldiers. The viziers in the hall grew afraid to draw breath; for the khan's silence was worse than his speech. In that moment a wolf dropped into his heart such as no enemy army had dropped there in forty years of his khanship. Once the wolf is in among the flock, numbers avail nothing; Esenkan knew this better than any owner of sheep, for it was he who had played the wolf for forty years.

— A child, you said, he said at last. How old is this child?

— None knows, my khan. Some say twelve, some fourteen. But whoever has seen him strike forgets to ask his age.

— What is his name?

— The Kırgız call him Çoñ Cindi. They say mad; but my khan, I saw those eyes. Those were not a madman's eyes. A madman does not laugh as he strikes; this one was laughing.

— Bring the ledgers, he said. His voice was low; and a low voice, in the palace of Beecin, had killed more men than a loud scream.

They brought the black ledgers called dañza; forty scribes opened forty chests, and the writings spilled out scroll upon scroll. In the ledgers of Beecin everything was written: in what year on what steppe how many foals were dropped, which camp had migrated through which pass, how many bowls of kımız had been drunk at which khan's table. The Kıtay was a country that trusted its ledger more than its sword; and that day the ledger shamed its master. Esenkan's chief reader of stars found the records of six years before, ran his trembling finger down the lines, and at last stopped at one place. There was written the word spoken six years before by the soothsayers, the star-gazers, the seers: among the Kırgız, to the man called Cakıp bay, a son will be born; he will be named Manas; if that Manas grows to manhood, a black day will dawn at the gate of the Kıtay. When that writing was first set down, Esenkan had loosed his spies upon the Altay, saying: seek out a boy named Manas, find him, strangle him in his cradle. For years the spies had roamed, camp by camp, asking the name of every child; they had found no one named Manas — only, in Cakıp's household, a boy with a running nose, hair matted like felt, and the manners of a madman. And what was that boy's name? Cindi. The Mad One.

Esenkan laid the two records one upon the other; the writing of six years past and the news come from the Altay met like two knife-blades. And the truth stood forth like a stone rising out of dark water: Cakıp had hidden his son under the name Cindi, and had cheated the whole vast Kıtay year upon year. The child who was to be strangled in the cradle had grown, and the boy they thought a madman had taken to breaking armies.

— So, said Esenkan, and for the first time his voice rose, so my spies, those I fed to be my eyes and my ears, took the wolf before them for a dog and passed on. So the fate written in the dañza laughed at us for six years from behind the mask of a snot-nosed boy.

That day in Beecin the sword left the scabbard and did not return to it dry. All the spies who had looked on Manas and failed to know him were ranged in the ordo square; their pleading was not heard, their years were not asked. One among them, tearing at his whitening beard, cried out: "My khan, we sought a Manas, and there was no Manas! There was a snot-nosed madman — were we to strangle the madman?" Esenkan answered from beside his throne: "You were. What use is a spy of the Kıtay who cannot tell the mad from the blessed?" The severed heads were set in a row upon the ramparts, that all who saw might take the lesson: such was the end of one who was Esenkan's eye and looked with blindness.

Then Esenkan summoned to his presence the giant-framed Coloy, black-hearted Ezkara, Döödür the champion, and also Karacoy the marksman, who struck whatever he loosed at, who could find the eye of a bird flying in the dark. He gave them seven thousand chosen soldiers; to every man layered armor, to every hundred a standard, to every thousand a drum.

— Go, he said. Reach the Altay. But listen well: that child you shall bring me not dead but alive. His dead body would go into the earth and his name would remain; bring him alive, that I may strangle his name myself. Whoever kills him will have written his own death with his own hand.

Coloy's wound had not yet closed; but the wound in his heart was deeper than the one in his flesh. He had fled from before a child; and this sat like a bone in the throat of a man who had been a balban for forty years. Ezkara said nothing at all. He was a man who believed in cunning more than in the sword; setting out, he took with him as much falsehood as steel. As for Karacoy — he never spoke in any case. His bow spoke in his stead; and every word his bow uttered was the last word someone heard.

When the seven thousand riders went out from Beecin, the drums did not fall silent for three days and three nights. The caravan roads emptied, the shepherds in the passes drove their flocks up into the mountains. The army flowed toward the Altay like a black flood; and ahead of the flood, as ahead of every flood, went first the news of it.

✦ ✦ ✦

In the Altay in those days autumn had yellowed the pastures, and the first snow had fallen in the passes. On the summit of Mount Orolmo, at the foot of a crag where the wind beat and beat at his felt cloak, Kutubiy stood watch. His horse Telkızıl was at his side, ears pricked, nostrils wide; the horse was a watcher like his master, the horse like his master had forgotten sleep. Kutubiy had been there three days; three days and three nights he had not taken his eyes from the east, from the road of the Kıtay.

Kutubiy was not of Cakıp's camp; he was a warrior come from the skirts of Kara-Too, one who spoke little and saw much. He had seen Manas in the battle with Coloy, and on the day he saw him had bound his heart to him, and from that day had made the summit of Orolmo his dwelling. "Let the khan sleep," he would say, "so long as his watcher does not; a homeland stands upon eyes that do not sleep."

In the mid-morning of the fourth day a dust appeared on the horizon. First he took it for a cloud; but a cloud does not walk from earth to sky. Then he took it for a herd; but no standard waves above a herd. The dust grew, spread, glints of iron flashed within it, the sound of drums came beating stone by stone up the mountain. Kutubiy counted; his eye was keen, and he made his reckoning from the standards: seven thousand. Seven thousand riders were flowing toward the pass of Taş-Keçüü. For the space of one breath Kutubiy stood still; one breath only. Within that breath he thought of the camp, of the old men in the camp, of the babies in the cradles, of the embers on the hearths. Then the breath ended and the work began.

— Telkızıl, he said, the black day has come. Take wing.

Telkızıl took wing. Down the slopes of Orolmo none could tell whether it was stone that flew or horse; when Kutubiy reached the camp the horse's chest was lathered in foam and his own voice had worn to a rasp.

— The Kıtay is coming! Seven thousand riders, Coloy at their head, they have taken Taş-Keçüü! Esenkan has opened the ledgers; they have learned that Cindi is Manas!

In an instant the camp hummed like a hive of bees. The women gathered the children, the shepherds drew the flocks down into the ravines, the elders assembled before the grey yurts. Mother Çıyırdı straightened up from beside the hearth; the bowl of kımız stayed in her hand. She remembered the day her son's name had been written into the ledgers of Beecin; on that day a stone had settled on her heart, and six years she had lived with that stone. Now the stone had spoken. Cakıp's face, the moment he heard the news, had turned to ash. The old bay had spent his life in exile heaping up wealth, breaking fear like bread and eating of it; and now he struck up his old song again.

— Let us hold council, he said. Is a head not saved by giving heads? Let us give half the wealth, let us set aside a thousand head from the herds, let us fit out a tribute of girls. Let us send envoys to Esenkan and say, "let us be your servants." We are as ants; the elephant treads flat the ant that will not yield him the road.

Before the words were done, Akbaltay rose to his feet. He was old, but his rising was a young man's rising; he girded himself, slapped his quiver to his belt, threw his shield across his back.

— Cakıp, he said, you would give your wealth — that I know; you would give your daughter — that too I know. But this time it is Manas they come to demand; we want him alive, Esenkan has said. Hear me: while I live, I will not give up Manas. God before me, the black earth beneath me; if blood must stain this white beard, let it be enemy blood. I will not give up Manas.

Manas was not in the camp that day. He had gone to At-Başı, to great Koşoy; he had seen the roads of his fathers' homeland and was on the road home; the black news had moved faster than he. Kutubiy, knowing this, set his teeth, and waiting for no man's leave turned Telkızıl's head toward Taş-Keçüü.

— Until Manas comes, I will hold the pass, he said. I am one man; but if behind one man there stands a homeland, that one man is a thousand.

Akbaltay called after him: "Wait, let us go together!" Kutubiy did not even turn to look; had he looked, perhaps he would have seen the tears in the old man's eyes and softened. What they call valor is sometimes this: not turning to look.

And Kutubiy rode alone against the army of seven thousand. As he rode he loosed a war cry that the mountains passed one to another, and the snow of the passes shivered:

— Manastap! Manastaap!

That day, for the first time, that battle-cry was flung into the face of an army, and the soldiers of the Kıtay, before that voice whose name they did not know, felt a shudder whose cause they did not know. Kutubiy plunged in; he toppled the vanguard, brought down the standard-bearer with his standard, and in the narrow of the pass he turned and turned and fought. Taş-Keçüü was narrow; and narrowness is the friend of the few, the enemy of the many. Seven thousand shrank to seven hundred in the throat of the pass, and even the seven hundred could not keep pace with Telkızıl's turnings.

Döödür the champion came forward; mountain met mountain. On the first day they fought with lances, and the lances shattered. On the second day they fought with swords, and the swords went blunt. On the third day the mace spoke, on the fourth the naked arm; on the fifth day the two warriors pulled each other from their horses and wrestled upon the stones. By night they parted, by day they met again; it was as if two men, not two armies, were at war, and seven thousand stood spectators on the mountainside. Kutubiy's shield split, Döödür's helm caved; blood seeped from Kutubiy's shoulder, blood ran freely from Döödür's flank. On the evening of the seventh day both warriors were covered in wounds; Döödür drew back to catch his breath, and Kutubiy drew into the bosom of the rocks to bind his wounds with mountain thyme. For seven days the pass gave no passage to seven thousand men.

On one of those seven nights the soldiers of the Kıtay whispered around their fires: "We have labored seven days over one man; what if that one they call Cindi comes?" The word went round the army, and as it went it grew; fear is one of the weeds that grow in the dark.

On the morning of the eighth day Manas arrived. He was returning from At-Başı; all along the road he had carried within him Koşoy's words, Bilerik's ordeal in the dungeon, the scent of a fathers' homeland longed for though never seen. The black news had reached him on the road from a fleeing shepherd; from that moment on, none could say whether Toruçaar's hooves touched the ground or not. Toruçaar — the tulpar born on the same day and in the same hour as himself, dun-maned, broad-crouped — felt in his own heart what was in his master's heart, and waited for no rein. When they reached the camp the horse's

chest was foam; Manas heard the news of the field before he had shaken the dust of the road from himself. Cakıp seized his son's stirrup.

— Son, he said, hear me this once. They are seven thousand; you are one. Esenkan's country is forty days' riding, his soldiers are the sand of the sea. Let us bow the head; the head that bows is not cut off.

Manas bent down, gently loosed his father's hand from the stirrup, kissed that hand, and straightened.

— Father, he said, you say the head that bows is not cut off; but the head that bows can never look at the sky again. I have seen the homeland of my father Koşoy; I have heard what Bilerik suffered in the dungeon. Better to be a man and fight for one day than to be a slave and live a hundred years. I said this word to you once before; may my tongue wither if I say it twice and turn back from it.

And pushing counsel aside with the back of his hand, he chose open battle. Kutubiy came to his side with his wounded shoulder; Akbaltay mounted his horse on old man's knees. Whoever among the men of the camp could fight was gathered; they were few, very few. Manas looked at them all, then looked at the seven thousand spreading from the pass, and smiled. Those who saw that smile told of it afterward under oath: there was not a grain of fear in that face; he was like a man going to a wedding.

✦ ✦ ✦

The battle broke at mid-morning, and the Altay had never seen such battle. It was not two armies that met; it was a sea and a spark. The sea's name was seven thousand, the spark's name was Manas; and that day the Altay saw the spark set the sea alight.

Manas drove Toruçaar forward; where he drove, the ranks went down like wheat. His sword passed from one side to the other, and where it passed the standards bowed. Döödür the champion, with his seven days' wounds, tried to stand in his way; at one stroke his helm flew off, and without waiting for the second stroke he flung himself in among the horses and was seen no more that day. And those who watched saw another thing besides, and could not themselves believe what they saw: around the young khan, in the dust, forty shadowy figures were wheeling. The sword descending upon Manas descended on emptiness; the arrow flying at Manas swerved from its path. They were the Forty Çilten;

and foremost among them an elder on a grey horse, white-bearded — Kıdır himself — never left the young khan's right side. The soldiers of the Kıtay cried out to one another, "this child is not alone!"; "look once and he is one man, look again and he is forty!" Panic spread through the army faster than plague.

Manas split the army's center; Kutubiy plunged in from the right wing, heedless of his wound; Akbaltay rained arrow upon arrow. Before noon the vanguard columns of the seven thousand were scattered, the drums fell silent, and three of the standards went down into the dust.

But if one face of war is light, one face is always darkness.

Manas had forty companion-children; forty boys of his own age, born in the Altay exile. They had gone for firewood together, herded the lambs together, huddled together for warmth under the same felt on snowy nights. Manas would say to them, "you are my wings"; "when we are grown, you forty shall be my forty çoro, and together we will lift the forty burdens of forty lands." The boys ate those words in place of food and drank them in place of water.

In the hours when Manas was wheeling at the navel of the field, far from him, on the eastern ridges of the camp, another work was being done. Coloy, whose heart would not carry him to face Manas on the field, had taken the black warrior Boroonçu and a thousand chosen riders, swung wide, and gone to strike the herds and the rear roads. There, in the hollow behind the ridge, they found the forty companion-children: forty boys of Manas's own years, who had herded lambs with him and wrestled with him, who had sworn, "we too shall be çoro." The boys had taken their stand to guard the herds, armed with whatever bow, staff, or shepherd's knife had come to their hands.

Coloy ringed the forty children with his thousand riders. The children did not run. They could have run; the bottom of the hollow opened to a stream, and the stream to a reed-bed. They did not run. The eldest of them — a boy whose voice had not yet deepened — stepped forward, and in a child's voice spoke the words that those who stood there that day could not forget for the rest of their lives:

— We are Manas's companions. A companion does not turn a companion's back to the enemy.

And the forty children, crying "Manastap!", walked against a thousand riders. The struggle did not last long; there was no way it could last. Boroonçu's sword rose and fell,

Coloy's mace rose and fell. All forty fell there, martyrs on the stones of the hollow; and all forty fell not face down but on their backs, their eyes looking at the sky.

Boroonçu looked back once at the hollow after those who were gone, and repented of looking; that look would return to him in the middle of his nights for the rest of his life. Coloy did not look at all; whoever thinks a giant's eye sees only great things is deceived — a giant's eye sees only what may touch himself.

Manas received the news at evening. He was returning from the field, returning in victory; when he reached the hollow, the victory turned to ash in his mouth. He got down from his horse and walked among the forty children; he took each one's face into his palm, spoke each one's name, one by one. With this one he had herded lambs, with that one he had played knucklebones, this one's wrist he had brought to the ground in wrestling only last spring. He counted forty names; through all forty his voice did not break, and at the forty-first word it broke:

— I told you that you would be çoro...

Mother Çıyırdı came, the women came; that night the hollow filled with keening. The forty laments of forty mothers melted the stone of the Altay; the stars that night, some said, came down lower than ever before, as if they wished to look closely at the children. Forty graves were dug side by side; at the head of the forty graves forty black stones were raised. Manas knelt before the graves, pressed a handful of earth to his brow, and swore:

— Let the black earth be witness, let blue Heaven be witness: in your place I will gather forty çoro; but no çoro shall ever hold your place in my heart. And if I leave this blood upon the ground unavenged, let my name not be Manas.

Akbaltay shook his old head and murmured so that no one might hear: "So the thing they call an epic is written first in the blood of children."

✦ ✦ ✦

When word of the defeat reached Ezkara's pavilion, the black-hearted khan was silent a long while. Coloy was growling, Döödür binding his wound, Karacoy silently testing the string of his bow. At last Ezkara raised his head; in his eyes there was a glint that swords are never whetted to.

— The sword is not answering, he said. What the sword cannot cut, the word cuts. This child is strong; but he is young, he is ala köödön — his breast is open, his heart is unmixed. When you cannot take the wolf with a trap, you throw meat before him.

Coloy broke off his growling:

— Esenkan wants him alive. Alive! While you dally with words he will break us to the last man.

— He will not, said Ezkara. Because we shall give him the thing he wants: peace. A pure heart believes the lie of peace faster than the truth of war. I shall win three days. In three days I shall have lassos braided, lassos with iron rings; and I shall show Karacoy a stone. And you, Coloy — do not look at the child himself; look at his horse. When the horse dies, the man is left on the ground; and a man on the ground can be bound by seven hundred, let alone seven thousand.

Next morning envoys under white banners came out of the Kıtay army. They came before Manas, bowed down to the earth, and poured out Ezkara's honeyed words:

— O young lion! Esenkan's eye has been opened; he has seen what you are. With such a hero one should not war but make friendship. Let the Altay be yours; mountain and stone, summer pasture and winter quarters, all yours. And more besides: let us make you khan over Çınmaçın, seat you on a golden throne, set you at the head of ninety khans. Only grant us three days' grace; let our army gather itself, let the gifts be made ready, let the ceremony of the oath be prepared.

Kutubiy bent to Manas's ear: "My khan, the wolf does not repent, and the Kıtay does not forsake cunning." Akbaltay too shook his head: "The three days they speak of are three thousand snares." But Manas was young; and his heart had not learned to hold hatred even at the graveside of forty children. A peace won without fighting meant blood that would stay unspilled; he believed it, he wanted to believe it.

— A man's word is one, he said to the envoys. I have granted three days' grace. But if you turn from your word, may the snow of the Altay never be sated with your blood.

When the envoys had gone, Akbaltay drew close to the young khan; there was no anger in his voice, only the tired sorrow of old age.

— Son, he said, your heart is white; and a white heart imagines the black to be like itself, and for that very reason is a weapon in the black one's hand. I pray they prove false to my fear and I prove wrong; but even so, sleep these three nights in your armor.

Manas laughed and gripped the old man's shoulder: "Father, if a man lives always by suspicion, how will he know the face of peace when it comes?" There were those who remembered this saying much later, on very different fields; that day no one could answer it.

The three days passed. On the first day the camp carried its dead and bound its wounded. On the second day the women renewed the laments at the forty graves; Manas combed Toruçaar's mane and kissed the tulpar's brow — taking his leave, it turned out, without knowing it. On the third day no bird flew through the passes, even the wind stopped; the steppe crouched low like a beast that scents the storm to come. For three days in the Kıtay camp no gifts were prepared and no oath-cauldron boiled; arrows were whetted, lassos were braided, the ranks were drawn tighter. Karacoy, in the dark of the second night, slipped alone out of the camp; he lay down behind the black stone on the bank of the Kara-Suu, and began to wait as a stone waits. And at the end of the third night, before the dawn had paled, the army left over from the seven thousand rose in a single mass to the attack. The drums roared out all at once; out of the darkness a rain of arrows broke loose.

Sleep had not taken Manas that night; he was thinking of the forty children. He was the first to hear the arrows; when he leapt onto Toruçaar the ties of his helm were not yet knotted at his throat. Kutubiy came up, Akbaltay came up; and as dawn broke, the fury of betrayal doubled and tripled the strength of Manas's arm.

— You have eaten your word! he thundered. Now the sword will speak; and from the sword's word there is no turning back!

Kutubiy had forgotten his wounded shoulder; Telkızıl and Toruçaar fell in side by side, and the two horses opened out like two wings and drove the army before them. Fighting stroke upon stroke, they pressed the Kıtay army toward the river Kara-Suu. The river was swollen with autumn water, its banks sheathed in ice. Manas closed in from the left, Kutubiy from the right; the army, tangling in its own multitude, poured into the water. That day the Kara-Suu added a new darkness to its name; its water ran blood, its foam ran red. Who fled drowned, who turned was put to the sword; and of the tongues that three days before had said "let us make you khan," some fell silent that day at the bottom of the water.

Out of that chaos appeared a giant mounted on a mule: Orgo the balban. No horse could carry Orgo; he rode a big-boned mule and bore in his hand a mace like a millstone.

He walked against the current of the fleeing, came on toward Manas, and roared through his teeth:

— Boy! From Coloy you may have escaped; from Orgo you shall not!

Manas did not flee; he set his lance once, checked Toruçaar for one breath, then loosed him. The two met at the river's edge; Orgo's mace stopped half-raised in the air — Manas's lance had found the joint of the armor and passed through the giant's heart. Orgo the balban toppled to one side like a felled plane tree; his mule, bewildered at its emptied burden, stood stranded on the bank.

Seeing this, Coloy clove through the remnant of the army and came out onto the field; he came out, loosed a war cry, threw down his challenge:

— Cindi! Come, let us settle the account of the other day!

Manas turned, and as he turned the hollow passed before his eyes: forty children, forty black stones. He wheeled his sword once in the air and charged.

— Coloy! he thundered. The blood of forty children is on you! Come, let us settle that account first!

Coloy saw that sword coming; saw how it came; and all the courage in his giant's body melted away into the ache of the last battle's wound. He half-raised his mace and could not bring it down; he turned his horse's head and fled. He fled a second time; he fled after throwing down a challenge, and that is the blackest of all flights. Even his own soldiers, watching him go, turned their faces away; for fear too has its law, and the flight of the man who has thrown the challenge is the one thing that law does not contain.

Victory now lay in the palm of the hand; the fleeing fled, the falling fell. And in that very moment Ezkara's true design, silent as a snake, went to work.

On the bank of the Kara-Suu there was a black stone that Karacoy had marked before the battle; a stone the height of a man, broad-faced. The marksman had lain behind that stone for two days and two nights; he had lain without stirring, without eating, without sleep. Ezkara had told him one thing only: "Shoot the horse. Let the man be left on foot; the man on foot is taken by the lasso."

Manas, driving the fleeing before him, passed in front of the stone. Karacoy did not even rise; from where he lay he drew the string to his ear and loosed the arrow. The arrow, a sly arrow that hid its own whistle, struck into Toruçaar's chest, just over the heart.

The tulpar stopped for an instant. As if he wished to understand what had happened. Then he took one more step — one more step, that he might not let his master fall — and his knees gave way. Manas sprang to the ground and threw his arms around his horse's neck. Toruçaar turned his head toward his master; those great, black, wet eyes saw Manas one last time. They had been born on the same day; they had grown up in the steam of the same milk, in the smell of the same homeland. Manas buried his face in his mane.

— My Toruçaar, he said, my dun mane, my wing... You and I were born in one day; was it written too that we should die in one day, and I never knew?

The horse held on for one breath more at the sound of his master's voice; then that broad chest sank and rose no more. The stones of the Altay had seen much death; but those who tell it say that on that day, by the Kara-Suu, a man wept for his horse as one weeps for one's mother, and no eye that saw it stayed dry — even in the ranks of the enemy.

The time granted for mourning was one heartbeat; war knows no mourning. Ezkara's horns blared; the army that had seemed to flee wheeled into a ring and came back. Against the wolf brought down on foot the dogs take courage; from all four sides, those who until that day had fled from Manas's very shadow now sheltered in the crowd and moved upon him.

The first to come paid dearly. Manas snatched up his Bozkelte; he set his back against the still-warm body of his horse and fought alone. Whoever came before him went down, and the one who came after was felled by the body of the fallen; the man on foot built around himself a wall of the dead. Ezkara watched from afar, sent them on, and counted; in his reckoning the man, the dead, and the lasso were all only numbers. As Bozkelte thundered, the way before it opened; but the opened space filled in again like sand. Kutubiy was far away; he had chased the fleeing to the far bank of the river and was struggling to return, unable to cleave the crowd between. Akbaltay was far away; the old man was shouting "Manastap!" with what voice he had, and his voice was drowning in the roar of the multitude.

Then came the lassos. The iron-ringed lassos Ezkara had spent three days braiding rose into the air from forty hands, from fifty. Manas cut one with his sword, slipped the second from his wrist, caught the third and pulled its owner from his horse to the ground. But the lassos were many, and his arms were two. One iron ring settled over his shoulder, another wound about his arm; the ring of men drew tighter, tighter, tight up to his throat. Once more the young khan shook himself — shook himself as a mountain shakes, two lassos

snapped, three Kıtay were laid on the ground — but for every rope that broke, two ropes were thrown.

Manas leaned upon his Bozkelte, lifted his head, and looked once around him. On four sides was iron, on four sides the enemy; help was far, the sky high, the earth hard. Within that tightening ring one direction alone passed through his mind; one direction, one face, one white beard: At-Başı. Father Koşoy. If hope was left anywhere in this world, it could come only from that quarter.

— Manastap! he thundered once more; he made his own name his battle-cry and thundered it. As the lasso tightened on his throat the voice sank; but a voice sunk low is not a voice that has fallen silent.

And the mountains took up that voice and carried it westward, toward the roads of At-Başı, from pass to pass.

CHAPTER 5

Koşoy Joins and the Migration to Talas

— ❖ —

Iron lassos rained down from all four sides. The whistle of the loops sliced the air; the ropes writhed like serpents, chasing one another to coil about Manas's shoulder, his wrist, his throat. Toruçaar had been shot from under him and he stood on foot; he had braced his Bozkelte against the rock, and with one hand he swung his sword while with the other he tore away the lassos that fell upon him. For every one he tore away, another came. The clamor of the Kıtay had become a single roar, pouring down the mountain slopes like a flood. The young hero's knees were bleeding, his palms burned raw where the ropes had flayed them, his chest rose and fell like a bellows. The sky was near, the earth far. And death swung between the two, at the end of a lasso.

At that very moment, from the side where the sun rises, a white gleam appeared amid the dust. At first no one understood; whether the fleeing came or the pursuing came, no

one could tell. The dust grew, spread, blanketed the backs of the hills. From within the dust emerged the tip of a banner, behind the banner a forest of lances, and at the head of the lances, upon a gray stallion whose mane streamed in the wind, an old man appeared, his white beard spread across his chest, his eyes flashing like flint. His beard burned like silver in the sun. It was Koşoy who came — the elder of the Katagan, the pillar of the Kırgız, the chief of champions.

In far-off lands Koşoy had heard the name of Manas, and the moment word reached him that "a hero has risen from the Kırgız and stolen the sleep of Esenkan," he could no longer sit still. On the heights of Çeç-Töbö he had gathered an army; Er Buudayık, whose word was his bond, had come; Aydarkan, khan of the Kazak, had come; Aykoco had come from Anciyan; the great mullah of Buhara had come in his white turban and added his blessing. Twelve thousand men had knotted their horses' tails and poured onto the road. On the way Koşoy had done one thing more that would travel on every tongue: at midnight he had stormed the dungeon of Beecin, and from the blind well into which one descended by forty ropes knotted end to end, he had drawn up Bilerik and Carmanas. The eyes of the two captives had forgotten the light of day, their hair reached their knees; at the mouth of the well they had fallen upon the old man's knees and wept. Koşoy had taken them up behind his saddle. "Do not weep — the day for weeping has passed," he had said. "Now we ride for Altay; there is a hero there, his name is Manas; his head is in peril, and if we come late our faces will be black with shame."

Bilerik would afterward tell of that dungeon night in this way: "At the bottom of the well we knew not day from night. One night we thought a stone had fallen from above; it was no stone, it was the end of a rope. Then a voice came, descending from the mouth of the well to its very depths: 'Is there a Kırgız down there?' When I heard that voice I remembered the lament my tongue had forgotten. 'There is,' I said, 'one not yet dead.' 'Then take hold,' said the voice, 'we do not kill the undead.' Forty ropes there were, knotted end to end; at every knot we drew once nearer to the sky." Carmanas never told of it at all; only when Koşoy's name was spoken he would rise to his feet, and do nothing more.

Koşoy had not come late. He arrived at the very instant the lassos coiled about the throat, at the very instant hope thinned to a thread.

— Manastap! roared the old man; the sound struck from mountain to mountain and descended booming into the valley.

— Manastap! Manastap! answered twelve thousand throats. The war cry drowned the hiss of the lassos in a single breath.

The army struck from all four sides. Er Buudayık swept down on the right flank, mowing down all before him like standing grain; he did honor to his name, and the ground he passed over lay like a harvested field. Aydarkan drove in on the left, and the black-lanced riders of the Kazak pierced the flank of the Kıtay. From the direction of the camp too the dust rose: Kutubiy, his wounds still bound, came on Telkızıl, heedless of his bandages; Akbaltay commanded his old knees to obey and girded on his sword. Even Bilerik and Carmanas, three days out of the well, joined the ranks with borrowed swords; the dungeon years had withered their wrists but whetted their hatred. Koşoy himself drove through the center; the chest of the gray stallion felled whatever it touched, and where the old man's white axe came down, no grass grew again. The lassos slackened; hands that held ropes groped for swords, and hands that groped for swords sought a place to flee. Manas, whose throat a noose had been about to close upon a moment before, hurled the last torn lasso to the ground and straightened; his chest filled and emptied once more, and then that familiar battle-shout, like the thunder of the sky, filled the field.

Aykoco came running between the horses, leading a gray horse, a folded çepken over his arm. The horse was a charger tall of stature, broad of haunch, wise of eye; they called him Ayvanboz.

— Mount, my hero, said Aykoco. This horse is Anciyan's gift to you. Take this çepken as well; masters wove it, prayers have soaked into it. Look at the collar.

Manas opened the çepken. On the collar of gray felt, worked in gold thread, there was an inscription: "Let Manas wear it in holy war." The young hero looked once at the writing, once at the old teacher's face; a warmth passed through him, and in that instant he understood that his name walked before him, was woven before him, was written before him. He drew the çepken over his back, set his foot in Ayvanboz's stirrup and mounted in a single bound. The horse trembled once beneath him, then, as if it had recognized its master, grew still and pricked its ears.

Those who saw that day's battle told of it all their lives. Manas rode upon Ayvanboz become lightning; one moment you saw him on the right wing, the next on the left; he fell upon the heels of the fleeing and rose up before the standing. The seven thousand of the Kıtay broke; the broken could not rally, and the rallied could not hold. Toward evening the remnant of the army poured into the narrow defiles; Manas hunted them to the gorges

where stone pinches close and a horse can scarcely pass. Ayvanboz had learned his master's nature on his first day; he turned without waiting for the rein and sprang without waiting for the voice. The mouths of the passes filled with the dead; those who escaped took the road to Beecin without a backward glance. Manas halted at the head of the last defile; he looked at the dust of the departing, looked long. Then he turned to Koşoy, who had come up behind him:

— More will follow these, father. Dust settles; hatred does not.

— They will come, said Koşoy. Let them come; on that day you too will no longer be the you of today.

✦ ✦ ✦

Coloy and Ezkara, having barely saved their lives, rode at the very front of the fleeing. They had neither food left nor spare horses; when they reached the gates of Beecin — alone, starving, weary, wounded — the gatekeepers did not know them. Coloy's mountain of a body had caved in, and the light had gone out of Ezkara's cunning eyes.

Esenkan received them standing before his golden throne; received them, but in his face there was neither mercy nor curiosity. There was only a cold wrath.

— I gave you seven thousand men, he said. At the head of seven thousand men I gave you two champions. What have you brought me?

Coloy could not lift his head. The word fell to Ezkara, who had always been fond of words; but his tongue too had cleaved to his palate. At last Coloy spoke, in that coarse, that thick voice of his, as if rolling stones up from his throat:

— My khan, I will not lie to you though it cost my life: no champion is a match for Manas. He is not one man. Look once, he is one man; look again, he is a thousand. When he raised his sword I saw forty shadows at his back; when I came to strike, no one was there, yet my sword rang not on emptiness but on iron. We shot his horse, we set him afoot, we wrapped him in lassos; forty lassos snapped, and all forty snapped in one instant. This is no champion's work, my khan. This is God's work.

— Do you say so too, Ezkara?

Ezkara swallowed.

— I know cunning, my khan, he said. By cunning I won three days, and at the end of the three days what I lost was a hundredfold what I had won. If I ever draw sword against that man again, may my hand wither. I will not draw.

— Nor will I, said Coloy in his turn. Strike off my head if you will. My neck is yours; but my sword will not rise against Manas again.

Esenkan was silent a long while. Among the pillars of the palace only the smoke of the censers stirred. The khan sat upon his throne; his fingers struck once, struck twice upon the carved armrest; then he turned to his viziers.

— Since the sword does not cut, he said, let us cut the road. Since no warrior withstands him, let a watchman withstand him. Alööke has a son, his name is Koñurbay; he is twelve years old, but his gaze is the gaze of a champion of forty. When he was born the soothsayers said, "this child will be a black day upon the head of the Kırgız." Set him as watchman-khan over the Kırgız road. Let his years grow, let his hatred grow; when the day comes, his sword will grow too.

It was done as he said. When the boy was brought in, the palace fell silent: he was a lad of twelve, but he looked not at the throne, looked not at the khan; he looked at the swords hung upon the wall. Esenkan asked him, "Are you afraid?"; Koñurbay said, "Of what?" and said nothing more. That single word sent a shudder through the old viziers. Thus a child of twelve became a khan in a single night; a seal was hung about his neck, soldiers were ranged before him, and he was seated at the mouth of the roads that faced the Kırgız. Nor did Esenkan stop there; he posted sentinels along the borders of his realm, and not one of them was of human kind. At the head of a narrow defile a one-eyed giant was set; its eye was the size of a millstone, and it knew no sleep. Upon a sandy plain a red fox forty fathoms long was loosed; where its tail swept the ground no track remained, they said, and any horse that caught its scent shied and turned back. And upon the lakes a herald duck was settled, its wings of silver, its bill of bronze; if a strange rider drank of the lake's water, the duck would rise, fly three days and three nights, alight upon the tower of Beecin, and cry. "If Manas comes, let these see him first," said Esenkan. "Let these see before we see; let these keep watch while we sleep."

Thus Beecin barred its gates with iron, buried its hatred in the earth, set a child khan over the grave of it, and settled down to wait. Hatred is the one seed that grows where it is buried; no one said this there that day, but everyone knew it.

✦ ✦ ✦

In Altay, meanwhile, the drums of victory had fallen silent, and that strange, bitter stillness of triumph had settled over everything. The dead were buried. Kutubiy's wounds were dressed; the hero buried his face in Telkızıl's mane and wept for the slain Toruçaar as one weeps for a man. Akbaltay walked among warriors the age of his sons, clasping shoulders. Manas alone was silent. One morning, before the dawn had paled, he saddled Ayvanboz and girded on his weapons. The first to see him was Koşoy; the old man seemed never to sleep, his shadow was forever appearing from somewhere.

— Where does the road lead, my hero?

— To Kakan, said Manas. To Beecin. So long as Esenkan's throne stands upon its stone, this business will not end. I ride to tear out that stone.

— With how many men?

— Alone.

Koşoy took Ayvanboz's rein into his palm; he gripped it so that even the horse could not stir. The old man's voice neither rose nor hardened, yet every word of it came down like a seal:

— Stay, my lion. If I do not hold your rein, your fate will hold it, and fate's grip is more bitter. Do you know what this Beecin of yours is? A stone city of forty gates, beyond a desert of forty days. You break one of its gates, and thirty-nine close upon you. A hero is like a flood; however wild the flood, if it has no channel it sinks into the sand. Where is your channel? Where is your homeland? Where is your people? When you look behind you, is there dust there, or is there a nation?

Manas did not answer. Koşoy went on:

— First a homeland is taken, my child. A man without a homeland they call a slave; a man with a homeland they call a man. Then the people are gathered; gather in the scattered Kırgız, seat the forty clans around a single cauldron. Then take to yourself forty companions — forty heroes each worth an army, who think before you need to think, who do not tire when you tire. If after that day you ride to Beecin, I ride beside you; with this white beard I will be comrade to your stirrup. But if you go today, I stay here and wait for the day I dig your grave.

At these words Manas's shoulders sank. He released the rein; he laid his hand in the old man's hand.

— Your word is my word, he said. A homeland shall be taken. The people shall be gathered. Forty companions shall be found. After that, Beecin cannot escape me.

— It cannot, said Koşoy, and laughed; within his white beard his teeth flashed like a young man's. And besides, my child, if Beecin fled — where would it flee to?

That day a great council was held in the camp. Cakıp spoke, Akbaltay spoke, the white-bearded elders spoke one by one. The decision came out as one: Altay was exile, and even exile has its end. The land of the fathers, Ala-Too, was calling; Talas was calling. The forty households of the Kırgız would move before winter came down.

Only one old man there was, a graybeard of the line of Aydaröö; when the word of migration went out he sat down upon the threshold of his dwelling and would not rise.

— My two sons lie in this earth, he said. Does one leave the dead behind and go? I will stay; let them lay my bones beside their bones.

No one could move him; Koşoy came, crouched down beside him, and sat a long while saying nothing. Then he spoke slowly:

— The dead are entrusted to the earth, old one; the earth does not betray a trust. But the living are entrusted to the people; if you stay, it is we who betray the trust. Rise. We will give your sons' names to a spring in Talas; everyone who drinks of its water will remember them. A gravestone is raised over the body, but a name is raised in the heart; and the heart is coming with us.

The old man wept that night, and in the morning he loaded his camel with his own hands.

Migration is easy to speak of. The felts were stripped, the gray yurts taken down and loaded on camelback; cauldrons, chests, cradles were bound up. The herds were gathered in, the sheep driven ahead like a flood. Mother Çıyırdı took the ashes of her hearth into her palm and put them in her bosom; "a hearth does not migrate," she said, "it is carried." Before leaving, Manas climbed alone to the ridge where the forty companion children lay buried. He knelt before the forty stones, and laid his hand on all forty of the forty stones. What he said, no one heard; but when he came down his eyes were dry, and his gaze was heavier than before.

The migration formed up on the road. In front, Koşoy's gray stallion; behind, Cakıp's caravan; on either flank the young riders; and at the very rear, swallowing the dust of the herds, the old people, turning again and again to look back at Altay. They crossed Kiçi-Cıldız, they crossed Çoñ-Cıldız. When they reached Ögüz-Aşuu the snow began; a blizzard had settled into the throat of the pass and shut the road with a white fury. Three days and three nights the migration shoveled snow; camels foundered and were raised again, children were wrapped in felt and carried in the arms of men. Tay-Aşuu proved harsher still; the pass had taken its name, it seemed, because on that climb the foals of the herds failed of their strength. But it was crossed. Beyond every pass they crossed, the air softened a little, the grass greened a little, the sky came down a little nearer. When they descended to the valley of the İle, the weary faces eased; and when they turned south from the İle and reached Sarı-Özön, the old people dismounted and clutched the earth in their hands, and smelled the earth they clutched, and wept. This earth carried the scent of the ancestors.

At Sarı-Özön a great kurultay was convened. Word was sent to the four quarters; from the scattered clans, those who could come came, and those who could not sent greetings. Some broke away from the region of the Six Cities and came, some from the Çüy valley; kinsmen who had not seen one another's faces for years embraced; some wept, some laughed, most did both at once. To see a scattered people gathered in again was like seeing the spring come: every day a caravan appeared from somewhere, every evening the count of hearths grew. White felts were spread, cauldrons boiled, and when the turn came for speech, it was Koşoy who rose. The old man stood silent a while in the midst of the throng; the longer he was silent, the more silent grew the throng, until at last not even a bird's voice remained.

— O Kırgız, said Koşoy. Does a body walk without a head? It does not. Does a people gather without a khan? It does not. I am an old man, older in years than you but no greater in wisdom; yet this much I know: God has given this people a hero. A hero who was born with black blood clotted in his fist, who at nine felled the champion of the Kıtay, who broke the sleep of Esenkan, who slipped free of forty lassos. You all know his name. I say this: let us take Manas, son of Cakıp, for our khan; let us plant his standard, let us cry his war cry. Is it accepted?

— Accepted! said the kurultay; with one mouth, in one breath. — Accepted! Accepted!

The cry echoed three times from the slopes of Sarı-Özön. When Manas was brought forth, his face had reddened; the great hero whose face had not reddened in the midst of forty lassos reddened before the love of his people. Koşoy took him by the hand and raised it high:

— Here is your khan! Blessed be his standard, open be his road!

✦ ✦ ✦

Scouts went ahead to Talas, and those who returned were struck dumb; they could not finish the telling of it. Then the migration saw with its own eyes and understood that the scouts had said too little. The valley of Keñ-Kol opened before them like a green sea. Its grass stood horse-high, its water tasted of honey; its winters were true winter quarters, its summers true summer pasture; its mountains were juniper, its flats were meadow. The deer of this land were fat as cattle; its partridge, they said, was too rich with fat to fly when it spread its wings. The snowy heads of Ala-Too watched over the valley like a father, and the Talas water ran through its middle like a silver girdle. A horse that drank of its water shed its weariness, they said, and a sheep that lay in its grass grew wool like silk; its winter frost was mild, its summer heat was cool, its wind drove out sickness, its soil held no stone. On one side the hollow of Keñ-Kol, to hide the herds and baffle the foe; on the other the open plain, to run horses and raise feasts. The old people said, "If this is what they call paradise, then we have come to paradise; and if it is not, what has paradise that this lacks?" Koşoy looked down upon the valley from a height and said only this: a homeland resembles its man; this homeland has taken after Manas. The gray yurts were raised, the smoke went up, and on the first night such a rain of stars fell over Talas that the children did not sleep till morning.

Feast chased feast. The feast of the khan's election ended and the feast of the taking of the homeland began; after that came the feast of departures and arrivals, of reunions upon reunions. Horse races were run, wrestling was held; kımız flowed like a flood, and the meat in the cauldrons did not fail. At one feast Kutubiy's Telkızıl came in first, and the hero divided the prize, nine yambı of silver, then and there among the mothers of the forty companion children; no one said anything, but in the middle of the feast a moment of silence came down, and that silence was deeper than any song. And one day it was noticed that no one said "Bay Cakıp" any longer; on every tongue was "Kan Cakıp." Cakıp had

become the father of a khan; when he passed through the camp the old men rose to their feet and the young men gave way.

But the heart of man is a strange treasury; sometimes on its fullest day its emptiest corner aches. One evening Cakıp spoke with the herdsman who kept the tally of the slaughtered flocks, and when he returned his face was dark. He found his son at the hearthside, sat down across from him, and did not hide what was within him:

— Manas, he said, blessed be your khanship; but is there anyone keeping the account of these feasts? This month nine hundred sheep were slaughtered, ninety mares were slaughtered — I do not count the camels. I did not gather this wealth like pebbles; over every head of it I gave days of my life. I saw want in Altay; in the cold of winter I slept against the flanks of foals. You speak one word, and a thousand head are gone. At this rate there will not remain in Kan Cakıp's storehouse a fistful of millet for a mouse to put its head into.

The words were heavy; heavier than heavy, they were like a lance. Manas bowed his head. He gave his father no answer; one did not answer back to an elder, least of all to a father. But that night he did not sleep. Through the tündük of the gray yurt he looked at the stars, and within himself he swore an oath: "If what my father gave was one purse, I will make it forty purses; if one herd, forty herds. The people shall look to my palm; I shall not look to the people's. With my own labor, with the sweat of my own brow, I will repay it; or else let them not call me a man."

He rose before dawn. He asked no counsel of Koşoy, sent no word to his mother; he saddled Ayvanboz and set out alone on the southern road. Only Çıyırdı watched him go; a mother's heart reads its child by his shadow, and she whispered, "Open be your road; wherever you go, go with blessing and return with blessing."

Manas rode for days. He crossed mountains, forded waters; at last he came to the flatland of Anciyan called Boz-Talaa. It was, as its name said, a gray steppe; untouched by hand, unseen by plow, a wild plain of knee-deep grass. He took its soil into his palm; the soil was soft as butter, black and fragrant. "This earth," he said to himself, "commits a sin by lying idle."

He did not see from whence the man came; when he raised his head, a white-bearded old man stood before him. On his back a patched çepken, in his hand a staff; his face was luminous not with sun but, it seemed, from within.

— Ease to your labor, hero, said the old man. Is it the earth you are studying?

— It is the earth I study, father. And I see it is earth worth the studying; sown, it would give wheat; unsown, it heaves sighs.

The old man's eyes laughed.

— The seed of the wheat is with me, he said. The strength of the arm is with you. Shall we be partners? Half yours, half mine.

— Let us be, said Manas, and laughed; and the wrist that had broken free of forty lassos gripped the plow that day.

An ox was found, the plow was yoked. Manas took hold of the plow-handle, and the old man cupped the seed in his palm. It was strange: the palm accustomed to gripping a sword did not find the plow-handle foreign. As he walked, the knot within the young hero loosened; his father's words still sat in his chest, but they sat now not like a lance but like a seed. "To cut is easy," he thought to himself, "to mow is easy; true manhood is in making things grow. If my father wept after his herds, I will draw wealth out of the earth and heap it before him; then he will laugh at what he wept for." As the black earth split open, its fragrance rose behind them; and as the old man scattered the seed he murmured a prayer whose words Manas could not make out, though he felt his heart grow warm. Three days they plowed, three days they sowed; on the evening of the third day a heaviness came down upon Manas's eyes, such a heaviness as no mountain could carry. He stretched out on his felt cloak beside the plow, and slept where he fell.

When he woke, the sun was on his face. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and could not believe what he saw: the field he had sown had come into ear. Come into ear — what a word for it; the wheat, rank upon rank, had become a rolling yellow sea, the ears bowed their necks with fullness, and in the middle of the plain heaped threshing-floors already rose like mountains. Yesterday's black earth had turned to gold today.

The old man stood at the foot of the grain-heap, as if he had never slept, never tired.

— Father, said Manas, and his voice shook. What manner of thing is this? We sowed yesterday — is it ripe today?

— When labor falls upon the earth, said the old man, the rest is God's affair. To some He gives in a year, to some in a night. To you He gave in a night; which means your debt is great and your time is short.

Then Manas looked closely: the tip of the old man's staff had put forth green; and on the shoulder of his patched çepken, sparrows sat side by side without quarreling. It fell like a drop into his heart: this was no common farmer. He knelt.

— Who are you, father?

— The plowmen call me Babadıykan, said the old man. I have never turned away empty a single man who set his hand to the plow; nor shall you return empty. Take my blessing: may your storehouse overflow, may your table stand open; may what you sow spring up, may what you give come back. And I have glad tidings for you besides, hero: a horse has been written for you; born of the unseen, it awaits its master. They will call it Akkula. From the day that horse comes under you, there will remain on the face of the earth no tulpar that can stand before it. Wait; the horse finds its master.

When Manas lifted his head from the ground, there was no one on the plain. Not a track, not a wisp of dust; only the wind passed over the golden ears like a shiver. But the grain-heaps stood; mountain-like, real, solid to the hand.

✦ ✦ ✦

That year there was famine in the south. Locusts had passed over the land of the Noygut; the sky had darkened, for three days the face of the sun had not been seen, and the swarm had eaten the crops down to the stalk. Karaça, khan of the Noygut, when his storehouses stood empty, had strung ninety camels into a caravan and set out, going from land to land asking, "Where is there wheat?" They had told him, "Go to Boz-Talaa; there is a hero there, they say, whose grain-heaps stand like mountains, and he turns no asker away."

Karaça came; when he saw the threshing-floors he straightened on his camel's back and blinked. Manas met him at the foot of the grain-heap, helped him down from his mount, spread his felt cloak and seated him upon it; he set food before him.

— Is it wheat you need, khan? Take it; if you have ninety camels, load all ninety. Let man not suffer for what the locust ate. Do not ask its price; bread has no price, bread has a blessing.

Karaça's eyes filled. The khan who had seen famine had never seen generosity of this measure. The wheat was loaded; ninety camels knelt and rose under ninety mountainous

sacks. The work was done, done indeed; and yet Karaça made no move to go. He stood as if about to say something, and could not. At last it came to his tongue:

— Hero, he said, might I ask your name?

— They call me Manas, son of Cakıp.

Karaça's face changed; as if a door he had long awaited had opened. He turned to his men and made a sign. Presently they brought a colt from the rear of the caravan. Call it a colt if you will; its neck had another curve to it, its chest another breadth, its gaze another depth. Dun of coat, shot through with white; when it walked it did not tread the earth, it seemed rather to flow above it.

— This colt has a story, said Karaça. Its dam vanished one night from the herd; three months she was sought, and not found. After three months she came back of herself; came back, and this colt was in her belly. It was born of the unseen, and none knows of what sire. The night it was born, the sınçı of my land, those old men who know the secret of horses, gathered about it; they looked once, they looked twice, and then they said to me: "Karaça, this colt is not yours. This colt is written to a hero; there is a writing on its brow — we can read it, you cannot. If you find its master and give it, your land will be blessed; if you withhold it, it will not stay in your hand, and though you keep it you will see no good of it." Since that day I have sought its master. Now I have come to your threshing-floor, I have eaten your bread, I have heard your name; and my heart has said: this is the man you sought.

Karaça rose to his feet. He untied the colt's halter, and laying both hands upon his breast, bowing his head slightly after the manner of his people, he held it out:

— Let it be my offering, Manas. What was born of the unseen was born for you. Take it; the writing on its brow is yours to bring forth.

Manas approached the colt. Seen close, its ribs were deep as a boat's hull, its legs clean as if cast in lead, its hoof like a bowl of steel; beneath the clipped mane the vein of its neck beat like a river. Even one without a sınçı's eye would have known that this colt was something more than flesh and bone. Manas looked at the colt; the colt looked at Manas. Their gaze held for a single breath, but into that one breath a whole lifetime seemed to fit. The colt pricked its ears, its nostrils flared, and without shying, without strangeness, it came and laid its head against the hero's chest. Manas's palm went to the colt's brow;

beneath his palm a warm pulse was beating, and in that pulse beat the word of Babadıykan: the horse finds its master.

— Akkula, said Manas; his voice was low. Let your name be Akkula. What comes of the unseen comes from God.

He feasted Karaça and saw him off; upon the ninety camels of wheat he added forty camels more, saying, "What the locust ate is not soon done eating." The khan of the Noygut, who had come with an empty heart, returned with it full; from land to land he told it: "I have seen the khan of the Kırgız; his hand is a harvest, and his heart is wide as Talas."

As for Manas, he divided what remained of the harvest among the poor of Anciyan; no one who came to his door went back empty, and for those who had no sack, a sack was sewn. Against his father's due he fitted out caravan-loads: from the lands where he sold wheat came yambı of silver, came mares, came bolt upon bolt of cloth. "Let Kan Cakıp's storehouse," he said to himself, "be so full now that not a mouse but a camel could go in and be lost." Then he turned his face north, toward Talas. He rode upon Ayvanboz; at his lead went Akkula, with a colt's steps but already a tulpar's bearing. The road was long, and all along the road Manas thought. Koşoy's words were in his ear: the homeland was taken, the people gathered; the turn had come to the forty companions. Forty heroes... Where were they now? At the hearth of what camp, behind what mountain, in the dust of what road were they waiting for him without knowing him? One night, camped at the head of a spring, he dreamed: a road of light came down from the sky before him, six gleams glided along the road, and far in the distance a rider, a gray shadow, seemed to have been circling the world for twelve years, searching for him. He woke; the dawn was paling, and Akkula stood at his head, gazing into the distance, toward Talas. Manas rose and stroked the colt's neck.

— Walk on, he said. Many are waiting for us.

CHAPTER 6

Bakay, the Forty Companions, and the Khanship

— ❖ —

Akkula had given his white-foamed mane to the wind and was hammering the stones of the road down to Talas with his hooves. Spring had come early that year; the waters descending from the snowy shoulders of Ala-Too had filled the bed of Keñ-Kol, and the steppe had clothed itself in a thousand kinds of green. Manas held the reins loose, listening to the fall of his horse's feet. The blessing he had taken from Koşoy's white beard was still in his ear, the encampments of Talas still before his eyes; and yet within him there was a lack, a loneliness, a waiting without a name. Could a man destined for the khanship become khan alone? Did the eagle fly on one wing?

Where the road bent, in the shadow of a black rock, a dervish appeared all at once. No one had seen him come; no shadow of his had fallen upon the road. On his back a patched cloak, in his hand a staff; but his eyes — his eyes were young, his eyes burned like two

embers of fire. Akkula did not rear, did not shy; he bowed his head and stood as one stands before an old acquaintance.

— Dismount, son of Cakıp, said the dervish. His voice was neither old nor young; his voice was like water coming down a mountain.

Manas dismounted. The dervish pointed with his staff at the ground; where he pointed, at the foot of the rock, lay a long bundle wrapped in felt. A moment before there had been nothing there — Manas could have sworn to it. The dervish opened the bundle: out of it came six swords, all six of steel, all six shining with a cold blue light, as if a piece of the sky had been forged and thrust into a scabbard.

— These came from no smith's hand, said the dervish. These came down from heaven, and waiting for their masters they have not grown old. Five belong to five heroes; when the day comes, they will find their men. But look at this one.

He lifted the topmost sword. It was longer than the others, its hilt plain, its edge fine as a breath. On its blade, sunk into the steel itself, written neither by pen nor beaten by hammer, stood an inscription: Kankor Manas alat — the blood-drinker Manas shall take it.

— Zulpukor is its name, said the dervish. Your name is written upon it in God's own writing, written before you were born; the steel knew you before you knew yourself. Take it. And know this also: on the day you gird on this sword, forty heroes from forty places have already set out. Some come from Altay, some from the banks of the Sır-Derya, some from lands whose names you have never heard; the forty have sucked the milk of forty different mothers, but on the brows of all forty your name is written. Until your forty companions are complete, do not halt, do not slacken, do not look back.

Manas took the sword. The hilt settled into his palm — like a hand that had waited years for that hand, like the hand of a lost brother. When he raised his head, the dervish was gone. He was not on the road, he was not behind the rock; only in the air there hung a scent like the scent of earth after rain. Then Manas understood: this was Kıdır — Kıdır himself, who comes to the aid of the one in peril, who is companion to the one stranded on the road.

He buried his face in Akkula's mane and closed his eyes.

— Did you hear, Akkula, he said. Forty men are coming from forty places. Then let me go too; let me gather in what is scattered, let me collect what is strewn. Cakıp's fear drove us

to Altay; let my oath bring us all together. Let this sky be witness, let this gray earth be witness: not one soul of my line shall remain in exile.

He sent word to Talas, sent greetings to his mother Çıyırdı; and himself, Zulpukor at his waist, set out alone upon the road.

✦ ✦ ✦

It was the third day along the Sarı Özön. The red of evening was beating the face of the water like copper when Manas saw a rider on the far slope. The rider had seen him too; both halted, both looked. The stranger was large of frame, his shoulders wide as a yurt door, but there was no swagger in his bearing; he stood calm as a mountain stands, deep as a spring stands. In years he was older than Manas; no white had yet fallen upon his beard, but it had fallen into his eyes — in those eyes there was the tired light of long roads, of sleepless nights, of a search without end.

The stranger moved first: he got down from his horse and walked forward on foot. A man who walks on foot in the steppe either fears greatly or fears nothing; this man was of those who fear nothing.

— Hero, he said, may I ask your name? Twelve years I have trodden the roads, and twelve years I have asked the same question of everyone I meet. One night — it was the Night of Power, the night the gate of heaven opens — I dreamed a dream. In my dream I saw a white falcon; it was wheeling above Talas, and the shadow of its wing covered all of Ala-Too. A voice said to me: rise, Bakay, son of Bay, go and find that falcon; you shall be not its elder but its companion; your wisdom shall be a rein to its wrist. I rose, and I went. It has been twelve years.

Manas's heart kicked in his chest like a colt. So this was the son of his uncle Bay; so it was his own blood, his own line, his true elder brother summoned by a dream, who stood before him.

— That falcon's nest is in Talas, said Manas, speaking slowly so his voice would not tremble. Its name is Manas. Manas, son of Cakıp — I am he.

For a moment Bakay did not stir. Then he took two steps, took Manas's face between his two hands, looked at his brow, looked into his eyes; all the roads of twelve years were knotted in that look, and were loosed.

— I have found him, he said, and only that. He said nothing more. There was no need to.

That night they lit a fire on the bank of the Sarı Özön. Bakay led up the white mare he had kept at his lead:

— Twelve years I have led this mare beside me as an offering, he said. So that on the day I found you I might give thanks to God. That day is today.

The white mare was laid toward the kıble, her blood was let, her flesh turned over the fire. They ate, they drank; the stars spilled into the water of the Sarı Özön. Then Manas rose to his feet, drew Zulpukor from its sheath and held it out to Bakay with both hands — not to give it, but to call it to witness.

— Bakay, my elder, he said. My years are young, my road is long, my enemies are many. You are older than I, your wisdom is deeper than mine. Let the two reins and the one halter of my horse be in your hand. If I stray, set me straight; if I overflow, rein me in; if I die, gather in my people. Is it accepted?

Bakay looked at the steel of the sword, looked at the fire's reflection burning in the steel.

— Accepted, he said. Two reins, one halter — let it be the debt of my neck. But know this too, Manas: the hand that draws the rein is not a hand that does not love the horse.

They laughed. To laugh at the end of a twelve years' search was sweeter than bread.

The next day they set out together, and on the third day, in the lower reaches of the Sarı Özön, they saw a man lying at the foot of a hillock. The man slept so deeply that he did not wake even at the sound of the horses' feet; he had put his saddlebag beneath his head, turned his face to the sky, and lay there as one who had made the steppe his own house. Bakay leaned from his horse and looked:

— Look at that ease, he said. No fear of wolf or bird in him. Either he is mad, or his heart is very great.

At that instant the man opened his eyes; he neither started nor sprang up; he looked at the two riders, yawned, and sat up.

— I am neither, he said. I slept at my ease because what I awaited had come. Of the seventy tongues I know all seventy; with the khan of the Kıtay I speak Kıtay, with the khan of the Kalmak I speak Kalmak; if I spoke to a stone I would soften the stone. My name is

Acıbay. In my dream I was told: lie down, sleep, your master will come and raise you from your sleep. And you have raised me.

Manas and Bakay exchanged a glance. Forty men were coming from forty places, were they — well, here was one who had lain down in the middle of the road and come to them in his sleep.

That evening the three of them sat around one fire. Bakay poured sacrificial blood into a bowl, all three plunged their right hands into the blood to the wrist, and all three swore the same oath:

— If one of us falls to an arrow, let us all die together. If the blood of one of us flows, let the blood of all three flow. Let our flesh be separate and our bone be one. Whoever turns from this oath, let him be cast out of this blood.

They locked their bloodied hands together. The water of the Sarı Özön flowed on and away; the oath remained.

When they returned to Talas, the first thing Bakay asked after was Akkelte. For Bakay had not seen only the white falcon in his dream; he had seen also, in the falcon's talons, a thing that scattered fire, and he knew that the thing remained in enemy hands. Akkelte — the living gun handed down from the ancestors; its barrel warmed of itself, in the night it gave voice as if sighing, it knew its master, and on a stranger's shoulder it grew heavy and ever heavier. It had been carried off as plunder in the Kalmak raid; now it lay in the camp of one of the Kalmak lords, in an iron chest, behind forty locks.

— If the forty locks are of steel, said Bakay, heaven commands steel. You make ready the army; I will make ready the sky.

That day Manas saw Bakay's other face. Bakay did not ride at the head of the army; he climbed a hill and drew from his sash the cay stone — the black stone of the ancestors that, dipped in water, finds the vein of the sky. He dipped the stone in water, recited the old words, poured out all the science of the weather-craft. First he bound the sun: the sun stood still in the middle of the sky and did not set; for three days a scorching brightness hung over the Kalmak camp, no eye knew sleep, no shadow knew rest. Then Bakay turned the stone and changed the word — and the sky went black. Seven days and seven nights hail fell; hail like fists, like the heads of lambs. The Kalmak's herds scattered, their felts were torn, the hearts of their warriors were crushed. At the end of the seventh day Manas's riders

came down upon the camp together with the hail; no one was in any state to lift a sword. The iron chest was broken open, the forty locks spilled to the ground.

When Manas took Akkelte into his hands, the barrel of the gun was warm — and that a thing which had lain so many years in an iron chest should be warm was beyond reason. On the stock, within an old carving cut by who knows which ancestor, a name could be made out: Manas. The thing too had been written to its master; like the steel, like the sword, like fate.

— Do you see, said Bakay softly. Before you were even born, your possessions knew you. Go on then; let no one remain who does not know whose he is.

And the flood to Talas began. From four sides, by all four of the four roads, they came. Some came as single riders, some with their whole camps; some came having heard the fame, some having dreamed the dream. The slopes of Keñ-Kol filled with gray yurts; cauldrons were set, kımız was drawn, and the fires did not go out till past midnight.

One of the first to come was Kırgıl — an old man with hair and beard gone white, a tongue of poison and a heart of gold. On the day he came he dismounted before Manas's pavilion and, in place of a greeting, picked a quarrel:

— They call me a graybeard, they call me Kırgıl the old, he said. It is true, I am old — but know this, child: I go in at the mouths of forty heroes and out at their noses; I set the forty at each other and part the forty from each other, and still the forty cannot do without me. I am quarrelsome, I am ill-tempered, and my word is final. Take me or leave me.

— You are the head of the forty, said Manas, laughing. Let your quarrelsomeness be our discipline.

Kara Tölök came — the diviner who read tomorrow in a shoulder-blade and drew tidings from the flight of birds. Irçı uul came — the young bard who, when he touched the string of the komuz, made the very stones weep; who raised laments behind the dead and praise before the living; his voice was such a voice that it made grief a child and joy a wing. Er Şuutu came, and after him came the many whose names were written down one by one; Bakay took the measure of each who came, Acıbay spoke with each in his own tongue, Kırgıl first berated each and then clasped him to his breast. As the count of forty filled, Manas's shoulders seemed to broaden; as though each companion were a missing rib of his, settling into its place.

One day an aging man came before the pavilion with a swaddled infant in his arms. He held out the swaddle with both hands, as one holds out an ingot of silver:

— Manas, he said. This child is a child of our line; his name is Sırgak. He is still at the breast, but look into his eyes: he lies in the swaddle and does not cry; he looks at you and does not smile — he is weighing you. We had the diviner read him: this child, he said, will be the foremost of the forty, the one who walks in front on the darkest night. Take him, let him be yours; let him grow at your hearth, let him become a man on your milk.

Manas took the swaddle. Sırgak — a hand-span of a child — looked at him and kept looking with those enormous eyes. Mother Çıyırdı gathered up the swaddle and pressed it to her breast:

— Beside a rich cauldron, they say, no orphan goes hungry, she said. This child is an orphan no longer. The milk that suckled Manas has not yet run dry; let Sırgak drink of my milk too, and be blood brother to Manas.

And from that day Sırgak began to grow on Çıyırdı's milk; the youngest of the forty companions, the companion in the cradle.

The circle was complete. Forty men had come from forty places, and the ring around the fire was full. That evening Bakay led Manas out before the pavilion and showed him the valley with a sweep of his hand: fires as far as the eye could reach, horses, gray yurts.

— What Kıdır said has come to pass, he said. Now comes the reckoning. Do you know whose whip-scars are on this people's back? In Margalan sits Alööke — khan of the Kıtay. From Buhara to Taşken he has laid all the Muslim cities under tribute; he takes girls, he takes goods, he hangs whoever stands against him. The vengeance of seven forefathers is knotted in him.

Manas touched the hilt of Zulpukor.

— Then let us go and untie the knot, he said.

✦ ✦ ✦

Alööke at that hour sat in Margalan upon his golden throne. The pillars of his palace were of ivory; in his pools swam fish bought with the tribute of Buhara. That day he had summoned his chief soothsayer — the reader of stars, the reader of bones — into his presence; for the evil tidings no longer came singly, but in flocks.

— Speak, said Alööke. Who is this dog that has whelped in Talas? When do I crush him?

The chief soothsayer was silent a long while. He held the bone to the fire and studied its cracks; he opened his book of stars, and closed it. Then he raised his head, and said the most terrible thing a soothsayer can say — the truth:

— You cannot crush him, my khan. This is not a man to be stopped. His sword came down from heaven; his name was written into the steel before he was born. The bone says so, the star says so, and I say so: Manas cannot be stopped. Send your army, and you will be left without an army; go yourself, and you will be left without a head.

A silence fell in the palace — so deep that the fins of the fish in the pools could be heard. Alööke tried to rise to his feet, and could not; the golden throne seemed to slide from under him, and the great khan tumbled down the steps. No one laughed; everyone understood that the throne had emptied that very day, before the war had even begun.

That night Alööke had the doors of his treasury thrown open. Gold, silver yambı, silk — he had it scattered to the people by the fistful; not because his heart was generous, but so that his load might lighten and his flight quicken. And before the dawn had paled he slipped out through the khan's gate of Margalan like a shadow, leaving behind him scattered gold, open doors, and an empty throne.

But flight does not deliver a man from that hunter called fate. Manas's riders — Akkula in front, Bakay and Acıbay on either flank, Kırgıl's forty in the rearguard — caught Alööke in the country of Kum-Arık. That day the sands of Kum-Arık rose to the sky beneath the horses' hooves; the ring drew tighter, tighter, and the great khan of the Kıtay, Alööke who had made the Muslim cities tremble, was left utterly alone in the middle of the ring.

He got down from his horse. He got down and — those who saw it never ceased telling of it — he knelt like a bride; head bowed, hands on his knees, sinking down meek and crushed, exactly like a bride brought to a new household. Even his voice thinned to a bride's voice:

— Manas, he said. My treasury is yours — what remains in Margalan, and what I carry with me. My son Konurbay is yours — take him, make him a companion, make him a slave, do with him what you will. Spare my life. From this day let me pay the tribute; let me stand at your gate and pray for you.

From Akkula's back Manas looked long at this broken man. For a moment — a brief moment — a softening stirred in his heart; to raise a sword against a kneeling old man does not come easy to a true man. But then other knees passed before his eyes: the knees of fathers dragged to Alööke's gallows because they could not pay the tribute, the knees of mothers sinking in the snow of the Altay exile. The gravestones of seven generations of his fathers passed before his eyes.

— Your treasury will be divided among the people, said Manas. Your son I will not touch — vengeance is not taken on a child. But as for you, Alööke: the vengeance of my seven forefathers rests on you. It was you who scattered the line of Nogoy, you who drove out the white-bearded elders, you who took the orphan's bread. Because you have knelt, shall that blood lie on the ground unanswered? Blood does not lie on the ground.

Zulpukor came out of its sheath; as it came it rang once, briefly — as if the steel too were reading its own inscription. The sword that had come down from heaven came down once, and Alööke's head fell to the sand of Kum-Arık. No one raised a cry of joy; death, even an enemy's death, was a heavy thing in the steppe. Only Bakay drew near and said quietly:

— One of the seven knots is untied. The rest we shall see too, if our lives suffice.

They did not search for Konurbay; the boy, before his father fell within the ring, had already slipped away through the dust and smoke and fled east. No one sent riders after him. Had they sent them — who knows. But in the book of fate that leaf was written otherwise.

✦ ✦ ✦

The feast of victory was raised in Talas, and raised in such fashion that those who saw it regretted that they must ever die. In ninety places the cauldrons boiled; a tulpar was chosen from the herd and slaughtered; kımız flowed like a river; Margalan silk was spread over the felts; the strongmen locked in wrestling, and the dust of the horse race did not come down from the face of the sky for three days. Koşoy came, Kökçö came; khans, lords, white-bearded elders of name and renown came — some because they had been delivered from Alööke's tribute, some to warm themselves at this young fire. Irçı uul did not set down his komuz for three days and three nights; for three days and three nights he sang the fall of

Alööke, sang the sands of Kum-Arık, and the blood of those who listened now boiled, now froze.

On the evening of the third day, just as the feast was breaking up, Koşoy rose to his feet. When the strongman of the Katagan, that mountain of an old man, rose, everyone fell silent; the kımız bowls hung in the air.

— O khans who sit, O lords who stand, said Koşoy. How much longer shall we put off one question? Who overthrew Alööke? Who took back Akkelte? Who gathered in the scattered Kırgız? Who assembled us around this fire? Each of us has made himself khan over his own camp — then whose is this camp of camps? A body does not have two heads; a household does not have two thresholds. I say this: let us give the two reins and the one halter to Manas. Not upon the white felt — the white felt is spread for any khan — but upon this gold-flowered carpet let us seat him; let us lift him to the sky and name him khan. If there is any among you opposed, let him speak now; the word of him who speaks afterward is no word at all.

No one spoke. Then Er-Kökçö rose and said "accepted"; after him another, and another — eight khans, eight elders of eight peoples, rose to their feet. The gold-flowered carpet — Buhara weave, out of Alööke's treasury — was spread in the middle. They seated Manas upon it. The eight khans took the carpet by its eight edges — Koşoy at the head, the others at the sides — and crying "khan!" with one mouth they lifted him to the sky. Three times they lowered him, three times they raised him; and all three times the steppe groaned "khan! khan! khan!", and the sound struck the snows of Ala-Too and came back again.

As Manas rose on the carpet, on the shoulders of eight khans, above the heads of his own people, he looked up at the sky. The sky, that day, was very near.

That night Bakay was sitting alone before the pavilion when Manas came and quietly sank down beside him.

— Is it heavy? asked Bakay, without turning his head.

— It is heavy, said Manas. The carpet was soft; the khanship is like stone.

— So it is, said Bakay. And so may it always remain. On the day you find the khanship light, you will find me standing against you.

But in the steppe, before the smoke of the feast has scattered, the smoke of the dust appears. As the news of the khanship spread to the four quarters, those who could not stomach it came forth as well. The hardest of these was Şooruk, khan of the desert country:

his land was sand, his army camels, his heart stone. "A khan, out of the forty-tent Kırgız?" he had said; "I will make that carpet his shroud," he had sworn, and had driven his camel army — hundreds of war camels, armored archers on their backs — against Talas.

The camels came; the steppe had never till that day seen such a thing. The horses shied at the camel smell, the ranks broke. The first day went hard, the second harder. On the third day Manas bound Akkula's eyes with his own sash, that he might see neither the smell's terror nor the fear; the forty companions did likewise, and on their blinded horses they plunged into the middle of the camel ranks. That day until evening Zulpukor went in and out of its sheath; that day Şooruk buried half the army he had brought from the sands in the earth of Talas.

On the morning of the fourth day Şooruk climbed the minaret of the town to which he had withdrawn — to view the enemy army from on high and order a new battle plan. He looked: he saw Manas at the head of the army, upon Akkula. Then he rubbed his eyes and looked again. Around Manas, to the right and left of his horse, before him and behind him — there were forty more riders; but these were not Kırgıl's forty. These rode a hand-span above the ground; their horses' hooves did not touch the dust; their faces shone like shards of the moon, and through their bodies, as through fine gauze, the steppe could be seen. The forty çilten — the forty saints of the unseen — had formed their troop around Manas and were riding with him.

Şooruk clutched the stone of the minaret. His knees gave way. One could war with an army, even with two; but there was no warring with heaven.

— I submit! he cried from the minaret; his voice fell over the whole town, into the emptiness between the two armies. I submit! Sheathe the swords! What stands behind this man is not flesh and bone!

That day Şooruk came down from the minaret and came out before Manas; but this kneeling was not like Alööke's kneeling; he knelt not from fear, but with the resolve of a man who has seen.

— Manas, he said. I saw with my own eyes; I am not so base as to deny what I have seen. Whatever your faith is, let my faith be the same. I have submitted; let my people not be left without me — let them submit too.

And Şooruk, with all his people, with his camel herds and his country of sand, entered Islam; the profession of faith was spoken that day with the desert's own tongue. And as the

seal of the peace he brought his daughter Akılay — at the head of eighty beauties, the foremost of the eighty girls. Akılay was tall, black-eyed, sparing of speech; she had been offered because her father said "offer her," but even as she bowed her head, her neck did not bend.

— I give you my daughter Akılay, said Şooruk. She is the head of eighty girls; let her be a companion to you, and a bridge between our two peoples.

Manas looked at Akılay; the girl did not look away. There was no love in that exchange of looks — love was the affair of another chapter and another name, and that name was still living out its childhood in Buhara, in its father's camp — but there was respect, and by the custom of that day, that sufficed. The feast was raised, the marriage was sealed; Akılay became the bride of Talas.

Within that feast there was one more reunion, which brought tears to the eyes of all who saw it. Among the caravan that had come from Şooruk's country, a woman was wandering between the pavilions as if searching for someone; when she saw Bakay she stopped, rooted where she stood. Bakay saw her too, and the man worn by twelve years of roads trembled where he stood like a child.

— Körpöyan, he said.

— Seven years, said the woman. Seven years I waited on your road, Bakay. Everyone said, "he is dead"; I said, "his road is long." In winter I waited in the winter camp, in summer I waited on the summer pasture. Was it long, then, your road?

— It was long, said Bakay. But it came out here.

When Bakay had set out in pursuit of a dream to find Manas, he had left his betrothed behind; fate had found him what he sought, and had brought back to him what he had left. Two wedding feasts were raised in one; that night Irçı uul praised now Manas and Akılay, now Bakay and Körpöyan; the string of the komuz snapped and he changed it, and sang again.

Talas, in those days, was the brightest place in the world.

✦ ✦ ✦

But the world was not only Talas. Far to the east, beyond forty days of road, in the stone-walled palace of Beecin — of the land of Kakançın — there was at that hour another council, and in that council no one was laughing.

Konurbay, since fleeing Kum-Arık, had eaten road and not eaten sleep. When he entered the jade-floored hall of the Beecin palace his clothes were dust and his lips were cracked; but his eyes — there was no dust in his eyes, in his eyes were two black flames. On the throne sat old Karıkan, the great khan of Kakançın; beside him his chief soothsayer, around him his lords.

— Speak, said Karıkan.

— Margalan has fallen, said Konurbay. His voice was flat, like stone. My father Alööke, in the country of Kum-Arık... — he paused a moment, carrying the word as one carries a burden — ...was put to the sword while kneeling. His head was taken by Manas of the Kırgız. The treasury is scattered, the land is lost. I, his son Konurbay, saw it with my own eyes and have brought you the word.

Karıkan made to rise, as custom demanded — one stands in mourning for a friend khan's death — but his old knees could not bear that news; the great khan tumbled down the steps of his throne. The lords rushed to him and raised him up; Karıkan's face was like lime. Alööke had been his right arm, the keeper of the western gate; the western gate now stood open, and the name of the wind that came in through the open gate was Manas.

Then Konurbay knelt in the middle of the hall — but this was not the kneeling of the defeated; it was the kneeling of one who swears an oath. He drew his sword and laid it before him, upon the jade.

— Karıkan, he said. And you, lords of Kakançın, hear me. My father's blood was left in the sand of Kum-Arık. I took that sand into my palm, I bound it into my sash; here it is, I carry it upon my breast. Until this sand is wetted with blood — with the blood of Manas — let feasting be forbidden to me, Konurbay, let laughter be forbidden, let a soft bed be forbidden. I will cut off the head of his horse, I will overturn the stone of his hearth, I will make his companions slaves and his people rags. If I turn from this oath, may my father's corpse spit in my face in the world to come.

In the hall no one drew breath. Then the chief soothsayer — bone-faced, a hundred years old — struck the floor three times with his staff.

— Your oath is great, Konurbay, he said. But listen. I have looked at the bone, I have looked at the star: Manas's star is rising now, at its full blaze; whoever goes against him now is a moth going into the fire. Wait six years. For six years gather armies, for six years have iron forged, for six years feed your arm and your hatred. At the end of six years other stars will crowd in beside that star, and its light will be divided. Then strike. He who strikes early digs his own grave early.

Konurbay raised his head, looked at the soothsayer, then looked through the window behind the throne toward the west — toward where Talas lay. Six years. He tightened the sash filled with sand.

— I will wait, he said. Hatred grows sharper for the waiting.

That night in Talas the fires were generous; the kımız bowls were filling, Irçı uul's voice was touching the stars, Çıyırdı was singing a lullaby to Sırgak in his swaddle, Akılay stood on the threshold of her new pavilion, and Bakay and Körpöyan sat side by side gazing into the fire. No one was looking at the horizon. Only Bakay, once, lowered his bowl and turned his head toward the east and smelled the air long and deep — was rain coming, or what was coming?

At the far edge of the east, blacker than the black of night, a thin cloud hung. It was still very far away. But the wind was blowing toward the west.

CHAPTER 7

The Tale of Çubak Baatir

— ❖ —

On the high summer pastures of Alay, in the valley where the snowmelt came down like veins of silver, grazed the ninety thousand horses of Akbaltay, khan of the Noygut land. A traveler who climbed the hills of a morning and looked out would see manes rippling from one end of the plain to the other and could not believe that so much wealth belonged to a single man. His mares were milked, his leather sacks brimmed with kımız, and there was no day his cauldrons went without meat. Guests were never wanting at his grey yurt; its felts lay fold upon fold, its door stood open to the four winds. Yet in the midst of all this plenty, Akbaltay's heart was as cold and empty as a yurt forgotten in the depth of winter.

For wealth, the old men would say, is running water; where there is no hand to hold it, it flows away and is gone. The neighing of ninety thousand horses came to Akbaltay's ears in the dead of night like a lament: without you we are orphaned, they seemed to say; when you go, we scatter.

Akbaltay had taken sixty wives. Some had come as brides from Noygut, some from Kaşgar, some from the vine-hung, garden-rich encampments of far Anciyan. And the arms of all sixty had remained empty. The cradle-makers no longer called at his door, and the mothers of the camp had taken to shielding their children from his shadow; among the people it was said, "The eye of Bay Akbaltay carries the evil glance—those eyes cannot bear the sight of young." The khan knew this, knew it and said nothing. Only at night, when sleep would not come beneath the felt, he would gaze up through the starlit eye of the smoke-ring at the sky and reckon within himself: to whom will ninety thousand horses fall, in whose palm will this white beard be wetted, who will lay fire on my hearth when I am dead?

The year he turned eighty-four, on the morning of a feast of sacrifice, he had a white-grey mare slaughtered, gathered the elders of the camp, and declared his decision:

— Let my wealth pass to fortune, and my fortune to the people. I shall set out upon the road to Mecca. God gave me no child in this world; let my grave, at least, lie in blessed earth. Load my provisions upon my camel.

The elders bowed their heads. No one could say "do not go"; for they all knew that in the eyes of a childless old man the steppe, however wide, is no different from a grave. Only the eldest among them, Kutunay, whose beard reached his belly, said slowly:

— Bay Akbaltay, the road is long, the desert without mercy. But no mind can fathom the workings of God. There are some who seek a child at their own breast; and to some, a child comes from the road.

Akbaltay paid the words no heed that day. The camel train was drawn up, the saddlebags were bound, provisions for forty days and forty nights were loaded. The khan took his leave of his sixty wives one by one; when he stood before the eldest, Markatay, tears broke from the woman's eyes. Markatay was a woman of great dignity; never in her life had she wept before her khan. That day she wept.

— My khan, she said, forty years I have kept your hearth, and I could give you no child. Whether the fault lies with me, with you, or with fate—I do not know. But know this: if you return, you will find your door open and your hearth burning.

— I shall not return, Markatay, said Akbaltay. Past this age, the road home is forbidden me.

The caravan set out. They crossed the passes of Alay, skirted the edge of Kaşgar, and came to the places where the grass ends, the water fails, and the sand becomes a sea. All along the road Akbaltay spoke not a word; on his camel's back, his eyes on the horizon, his lips faintly moving, he prayed without ceasing. His men saw him thus and whispered among themselves: our khan has withdrawn his hand from the world, they said; they did not know that the world clings to the hem of him who withdraws his hand. In that endless yellow waste they call the Mediyen desert, the sun by day boils a man's brain, and by night the frost freezes his bones. At the end of the third week a sandstorm broke; for three days and three nights heaven and earth were mingled, for three days and three nights neither star nor sun appeared. When the storm subsided Akbaltay counted his camels: the strongest of them all, the great bull camel with blue beads at its neck, was gone.

— There is no pilgrim without a camel, said the khan. Find it.

His men scattered to the four quarters and returned at evening empty-handed. Akbaltay did not sleep that night. At the breaking of dawn he rose himself, took his staff, and walked alone into the sands. His old man's steps sinking into the dunes, he went eastward, toward the redness of the sun. He crossed one crest of sand, then another—and beyond the third, at the edge of a stand of dry reeds, he saw his lost bull camel.

The camel had knelt, its neck outstretched, and stood unmoving. And upon its hump, wrapped in white felt and bound fast with stout ropes, there was something. Akbaltay drew near; from within the felt came a sound—thin, piercing, aggrieved at the world. The khan's knees trembled. He cut the rope, opened the felt: within lay a baby boy, his face flushed, his fists clenched, crying.

Akbaltay sank down upon the sand. He pressed the child to his breast; the child fell silent. In the vast silence of the desert the old khan, for the first time in eighty-four years of life, felt a child's breath against his own chest. Tears came from his eyes and dropped from his beard into the sand.

— My God, he said, I was going to ask You for a grave. You have sent me a cradle.

Whose child it was, from what caravan it had fallen, what mother on what black day had wrapped it in felt and bound it to a camel—he did not ask, did not inquire, and wished that none should ask. When he returned to his caravan he gathered his men about him, laid his sword in their midst, and said:

— This child is the gift of God. Whoever says "he was found in the desert," may his tongue wither. Whoever opens the secret, may his hearth go dark. Swear the oath.

The men laid their hands upon the sword and swore. The caravan turned back; the road to Mecca was left half-traveled, yet on Akbaltay's face there was the light of a man returned from pilgrimage. When they reached Alay the khan sent word through his camp: "My wife Markatay has borne a son!" When Markatay heard this news she first stood frozen; then she looked deep into her khan's eyes; then, without a word, she took the child into her arms and pressed him to her breast. From that day forward, whoever asked, she said, "I bore him"; and against the certainty in her voice no one could stand.

A feast was held—such a feast as Alay had never seen. Cauldrons boiled in nine places, ninety mares were slaughtered, kımız flowed like a flood. Guests came from Kaşgar, from Anciyan, from the far reaches of the Çüy; none who came went home empty-handed—robes were cut for all, horses were given in gift. Wrestlers grappled, horses were raced, the bards wove songs of praise. The khan of eighty-four strode through the midst of the feast like a young man, gripping every hand, saying to everyone, again and yet again, as though he were beginning with himself in the persuading: — Markatay bore him! My wife Markatay bore him! But when it came to giving the child a name, a strange thing happened. The eldest of the camp rose to his feet, opened his mouth—and no name came to his tongue. They summoned a mullah; the mullah pronounced the bismillah, pondered, sweated, said, "It was not granted," and sat down. Three days the feast lasted, three days a name was sought, three days none was found. The baby lay nameless, and a worm of dread gnawed at Akbaltay's heart: a nameless child, they said, the guardian spirits cannot protect.

In the late afternoon of the third day, out of the crowd of the feast, there appeared one whom no man had seen arrive. He was barefoot; on his back a patched dervish cloak, in his hand a gnarled staff, on his head an old cap of felt. His feet were feet that had walked the desert, yet they bore no dust. He walked straight to the cradle; no one barred his way, no one could. He bent over the child, looked into his face, and laughed.

— O Akbaltay, he said, is it a name you seek? The name stands ready; it is you who have come late. Let this boy's name be Çubak. Cast into fire, may he not burn; cast into water, may he not sink; let the sword cut, yet not cut him; let the arrow strike, yet not strike him. When he reaches his twelfth year, let him go to Talas; there is Manas, son of Cakıp, Manas the panther—let him be written among his çoros, and stand at his right hand. His road leads there; so was it written on his brow.

Before Akbaltay could open his mouth to say, "Who are you, whence do you come, sit, eat of our food," the dervish turned and melted into the crowd—and when the crowd parted and all looked, there was no one there. Only at the head of the cradle, freshly pressed, lay a small footprint; upon the felt, barefoot.

Old Kutunay struck both hands upon his knees:

— It was Kıdır! he cried. Kıdır himself—he gave the name and departed! Great shall be this child's fortune!

That day the drums of Alay were beaten once more, and the child, under the name Çubak, became the very eye and jewel of the Noygut land.

✦ ✦ ✦

Çubak grew as a stone torn from the cliff rolls—swift, hard, unstoppable. At five he was another's ten; at seven, another's fifteen. At one year he walked, at three he sat a horse, at five he began throwing boys of his own height in the belt-wrestling. The boys of Alay grew afraid to wrestle him; whomever he seized he laid flat, and every horse fell behind his. Markatay had not raised him on her own milk, but she had raised him on her own heart; when the child said "mother" the woman's eyes would fill, and she let no one see them fill. Akbaltay rejoiced whenever he looked at his son's wrist; yet when he looked at the fire in his eyes, for a reason he could not name, he shivered. One day he opened his heart to Kutunay: — This fire frightens me, he said. Kutunay laughed: — The fire of the hearth burns, and so does the fire of the foe. The difference lies in who sits at the head of the fire. At the head of this child shall sit Manas; do not fear.

When the boy reached eleven, Akbaltay, though he had not forgotten Kıdır's word, wished first to render God His due, and sent his son to Mecca to study. There Çubak studied six years. Lessons in the morning, lessons at night; he mastered the letters, devoured the books, learned prayer and learned reckoning alike. His teachers marveled: how does that wrist hold the pen so finely? But at night, in the narrow cell of the medrese, he saw always the same thing in his dreams: a steppe, boundless; in the midst of the steppe a white horde-tent; before the tent, upon a great black-maned horse, a warrior whose face was like the sun. And a voice out of the unseen: "Çubak, you are this warrior's companion. Your

names are written in one ledger; your name is written beside his. He is Manas, and you are his çoro."

At the end of the six years his teachers granted him his license. The most venerable imam, white-bearded, his eyes rimmed with kohl, called Çubak to his side:

— Son, he said, you are not a man of the book; you are a man of the sword. I saw it the first day, and for six years I held my peace. Of learning you have been given your sufficiency: enough to part the forbidden from the lawful, and tyranny from justice. The rest the steppe will teach you. But do not go out to the steppe naked.

The imam had a chest opened. From it came a coat of mail—its rings flowing like water, its color neither iron nor silver but a kaftan of something between the two.

— No arrow passes this, said the imam. The sword strikes it and cannot cut; the spear falls and cannot pierce. Seven generations it has waited for its owner. Its owner, it seems, is you. Put it on.

Çubak put on the mail; he seemed to put it on not over himself but into himself—so perfectly did it fit. He kissed the imam's hand and took to the road.

When he returned to Alay he was seventeen, and he asked his father for one thing only: a horse.

— I saw it in my dream, father, he said. A horse will carry me to Talas. It must be a horse no arrow can overtake; search the herds.

Akbaltay had his ninety thousand horses divided into nine droves, and drove the nine droves one by one past his son. Çubak studied each horse's flank, felt each chest, looked into each eye, and shook his head: not this one. Nine days the passing lasted; on the evening of the ninth day, when the ninety-thousandth horse too had gone by, Çubak slung the halter in his hand over his shoulder.

— My horse is not in this herd, he said. Then it is on the road. I will go on foot; my horse will find me.

And the khan's son of the Noygut land, the arrow-proof mail on his back, an empty halter on his shoulder, set out upon the roads on foot. Those who saw him beat their breasts—"He has gone mad; does a khan's son go afoot?" they said; Çubak did not so much as turn to look. For days he walked. His feet swelled, his sandals wore through; he walked. One evening, as the sun was sinking, he came before the blessed shrine they call the tomb of Baabedin. The stones of the shrine were ancient; votive rags were tied to the willows about

it, and the wind swayed them softly. Çubak performed his ablutions, prayed two rekats, and sat down at the foot of the tomb, gazing at the halter in his hand.

— O saint who lies in this tomb, he said. I was told: be çoro to Manas. A çoro is a mounted man. Where is my horse?

At midnight, when the moon stood at its zenith, a neighing came from afar. Çubak sprang up. Out of the darkness there first appeared an old man—bent of back, his beard silver in the moonlight; he was leading a horse by its halter. As the horse came into view, Çubak's breath failed him: its coat lay somewhere between grey-blue and dappled, its neck long, its haunches broad, its eyes two live coals. The old man drew near and held out the halter:

— I bring back what is lost, he said. This one too was lost; it was seeking its owner. Look upon its flank.

Çubak bent and looked at the horse's flank in the moonlight: amid the hairs, as though from birth, as though grown with the very coat, was writing: The panther Çubak rides me. The young warrior sank to his knees; when he raised his head, the old man was gone. Not a footfall, not a shadow. Only the horse, Kögala, resting his muzzle upon his shoulder, seemed to say with his warm breath: "Rise; our road is long."

✦ ✦ ✦

The horse was blessed, the mail was blessed; but the rider was young, and youth does not rest until it has tasted the power in its hand. Çubak did not forget Talas—Talas was deferred. First, he told himself, "Show yourself, then go; one does not come before Manas nameless; win a name and then go." On Kögala's back he struck his first blow against Oogan, and won. The more he won, the more he wanted; the more he wanted, the harder he struck. Ten times he trampled Oogan; six times he broke the gates of Kaşgar; he laid Anciyan under tribute, and made the khan of Kokon strike him a yambı's measure of gold each year. On the rare days he returned to Alay, Akbaltay would look at his son, wish to say something, and be unable. Once he could bear it no longer:

— Son, he said, Kıdır said Talas to you, and you say Kaşgar. Kıdır told you to be a çoro, and you are becoming a khan.

— I shall be one, father, said Çubak. Only Buhara remains. Once I have bent Buhara too, I will carry half the world as a gift before Manas.

Akbaltay shook his head and fell silent. He knew that counsel to a young stallion is a line drawn upon running water. Çubak's fame crossed the mountains: at the words "Çubak son of Akbaltay is coming," camps struck their tents and khans threw open their gates. No arrow could overtake his horse, no arrow could pierce his kaftan; and in the young hero's eyes there slowly grew that light—the light in the eyes of conquerors, insatiable and hungry.

At last he turned and looked toward Buhara. The khan of Buhara was Temirkan; he had bowed his head neither to Esenkan nor to Alööke; his city was walled, his army tight-knit, his treasury deep. "All have bowed; this one alone remains," said Çubak, and he sent an envoy: "Either send your tribute, or send a warrior into the field."

Temirkan heard the envoy out, stroked his beard, and was long silent. There was no son in his palace; he had twelve daughters, and all twelve were fragments of the moon. Yet whenever the khan thought of the youngest of his daughters, his heart grew easy; for that girl was not like the others.

Her name was Kanıkey. The hands that worked embroidery knew the sword-hilt too; she would stand to wrestle with her father's strongmen, and it was she who gentled the wildest of the argımaks. Whatever in the palace was men's work she had learned in secret, and not merely learned—in all of it she had surpassed the masters. The old women of Buhara would tell what they had heard from the nurse who had carried her: the night this girl was born, a star stood over the horde-tent and did not glide away until morning. Temirkan loved all twelve of his daughters; but when he looked at this youngest one, he saw something that filled the place of all the sons he had lost, and he could not give it a name. When the envoy's words fell upon the horde, before Temirkan could so much as open his mouth, Kanıkey stepped out from behind the curtain:

— Father, she said. Is there no warrior in Buhara, that we should pay tribute? I will go into the field.

— You are a girl, said Temirkan, and his voice shook.

— In the field it is the armor that speaks, father. No one sees what is beneath the armor. If I am beaten, Buhara was going to fall anyway; if I win, we are under no obligation to say who won.

The khan looked long at his daughter. Then—whether from helplessness or from pride, who can say—he bowed his head:

— Bring out the black-blazed argımak, he said. Fetch the closest-woven of the armors.

The field of combat lay outside the walls of Buhara, a flat ground ringed with banners, strewn not with sand but with beaten gold dust—a legacy of Temirkan's fathers; they called it "the gold-laid field." The next morning, at one end of the field stood Çubak upon Kögala, his lance raised to the sun; at the other end, upon the black-blazed argımak, appeared a warrior slender but bolt-upright, the face invisible within the helm. Çubak measured his opponent and laughed:

— It seems there is a famine of men in Temirkan's army; they have sent a boy. Ho, boy! Tell me your name, that we may have it carved on your gravestone!

No answer came from across the field. Only the black-blazed horse took one step forward, and the point of the lance, without a tremor, swung to bear upon Çubak's chest. That silence weighed heavier than all the challenges Çubak had ever heard.

The drum was struck. In the first charge the two horses streamed toward each other from the two ends of the field, and two lances were met on two shields; the horses passed one another and wheeled. Çubak marveled at the shock in his arm: this wrist was no boy's wrist. In the second charge he drove Kögala in from the flank, trying craft; the black-blazed horse seemed to read his mind—it fled, struck as it fled, and the blow set his shield booming. Around the field the people of Buhara surged. In the third charge the two horses poured straight at one another at full gallop. Hooves flung the gold dust to the sky; and in the center, two lances came down as one. Çubak struck his blow true—with all the strength of his wrist, with all the craft of ten campaigns against Oogan and six sieges of Kaşgar. The point of his lance crashed against the armor on his opponent's chest and—broke. It shattered; its splinters rained down into the gold dust. In the same instant the other lance grazed past Çubak's shield and came down on his shoulder, bearing upon the arrow-proof mail with such force that the world was shaken from its place. Çubak, for the first time in his life, could not keep the saddle. He slid from Kögala's croup and fell into the gold dust, flat upon his back.

The field went silent. On the walls the people of Buhara did not breathe. Çubak rose from the ground; dust in his mouth, a roaring in his ears, and in his chest a feeling he had never known until that day: defeat. The warrior opposite had turned his horse and was watching him from the darkness of the helm. In that moment a voice within Çubak said,

"Your work on this field is finished today"; and the hero, unable to confess it even to himself, leapt upon Kögala, wrenched the rein, and drove out of the field.

Behind him came that voice he was hearing for the first time—thin, but like steel:

— If you are a man, do not flee!

Kanıkey sent the black-blazed horse after him. They passed the vineyards of Buhara, they passed the banks of the Sır-Derya; the fleeing fled, the pursuing pursued. No arrow overtakes Kögala, they used to say; that day the black-blazed horse was overtaking him—for a horse's speed lies not in the legs alone but in the heart of the rider, and that day the heart of the one who fled was in ruins, while the heart of the one who pursued was whole as a sword. Kanıkey had thrown off her helm; her hair streaming in the wind, she pursued; Çubak turned once to look, saw then that his pursuer was a woman, and his shame was doubled, and his flight doubled its speed. The girl drove him to the limit of her own reach, to the edge of the grazing lands of Buhara; there she reined in the argımak and cried after him:

— Go and tell your men: this is Buhara's tribute!

And she turned and rode away. Çubak, bent low over Kögala's neck, rode on and on; not knowing himself where he was going, the fire of defeat searing his flank, he drove north, into the heart of the steppe.

✦ ✦ ✦

In those days Manas was hunting with his çoros in Kara-Buura. A month had passed since they left Talas; on the ridges of Çatkal they had coursed wild asses, loosed their falcons at the wild geese, and at their evening camp had eaten meat, drunk kımız, and lain down to sleep. That night old Kırgıl had spoken long of the old days, recalling the Altay exile and the snowbound passes of the road home, talking until the fire fell to ash. At midnight Manas dreamed a dream, and woke and sat upright under its weight; there was sweat upon his brow. At first light he sent for Bakay.

— Bakay, my elder, he said. I have dreamed a dream; it sits within me and I cannot carry it. I saw a lion, a great yellow-maned lion, come following at my heels; I drove it off—it would not go; I halted—it halted; I walked—it walked. It passed to my right side, and at my right side it lay down. Then I saw a sun rise out of the qibla—the sun rises in the east,

but this one rose from the qibla—its light struck first my horde-tent, then entered my bosom. I stretched out my hand, and it rested in my palm; my palm grew warm, my whole body grew warm. Read this for me, my elder.

Bakay closed his eyes for a time. The wind stroked his white beard. Then he opened his eyes and spoke in that sage, unhurried voice of his:

— Your dream is blessed, my Manas. The lion that followed at your heels is one who shall be a warrior; its yellow mane is the abundance of his line. He is Çubak, son of Akbaltay, khan of the Noygut—the hero whom Kıdır named and Kögala carries. That he passed to your right side means he shall be the çoro of your right hand. In these days his heart is beaten and wounded; and a beaten heart becomes either enemy or brother—according to whichever hand reaches it first. Reach out yours.

— And the sun, my elder? The one that rose from the qibla?

— That sun is a girl, said Bakay. The youngest of the twelve daughters of Temirkan, khan of Buhara—Kanıkey. I have heard that she threw a baatır from his horse upon the field of combat; who that baatır was, I understand only now. My Manas, that girl is the very eye of abundance; a homeland's foundation is laid by the warrior, but it is held fast by blessing. Such a girl is not taken by plunder, nor taken by abduction; one goes as suitor in due form, bends the knee before her father, pays the bride-price, and takes her in honest wedlock. When the time comes, I shall go ahead.

Manas's face brightened as though the sun of his dream had risen within him. But first there was the lion; the order of the hunt was broken, the horses were mounted, and they rode toward the steppe of Samarkan.

The steppe of Samarkan, in that season, lay grey and dead-level to the horizon. Toward mid-afternoon Bakay shaded his eyes with his hand and looked, and far off he saw two clouds of dust: a small dust ahead, and behind it no dust at all—a lone rider, riding like a madman. Bakay laughed to himself:

— Does a lion flee like that? he said. But a freshly beaten lion flees; I know it well.

He signaled the çoros, "Come on slowly," and sent his own horse ahead. Bakay's horse was old, but it knew the roads; it dropped down a shortcut, wound along the bed of a dry ravine, and came out before the fleeing rider as though sprung from the earth. Kögala reared; Çubak hauled the reins taut and flung his hand to his sword.

— Leave the sword, young warrior, said Bakay, with a grandfather's gentleness in his voice. Am I of an age to be your enemy? Besides, your sword is weary today; we have heard —in Buhara, on the golden field, your back touched the ground once.

Beneath his helm, Çubak's face flamed scarlet:

— Who are you, old man, that your tongue is so long?

— My tongue is not long; my road is long, said the old man, and smiled. I am Bakay— of the elder house of Cakıp, the white beard of Manas. And I have glad tidings for you; do not be angry, but listen: the warrior who threw you from your horse was no warrior—it was Temirkan's daughter, it was Kanıkey. Is it shameful, you ask within yourself, to be beaten by a woman? It is not, my young hero. Whichever of the world's warriors had gone out against that girl would have been thrown. Rather than be ashamed, give thanks: it is by your defeat that your road has fallen here. From the day you were found bound upon the camel, it was written that your road should fall here. What did Kıdır say to you? You should have come at twelve; you are late; but Talas has not run away, and Manas is here.

Çubak's hand fell from the hilt of his sword. The camel, the felt, Kıdır—whence did this old man know it all? In Alay an oath had been sworn; the secret had not been opened; so secrets too had an owner, and that owner told what he willed to whom he willed. He was about to open his mouth when riders appeared over the shoulder of the steppe—and at their head, upon the black-maned, broad-crouped Çoñ Kula, a warrior.

Çubak had never seen him before. But for six years, in the narrow cell of Mecca, he had seen him every night in his dreams. That steppe was this steppe. That horse was this horse. That face—that face like the sun—was this very face.

The hero's body moved before his mind. His slipping from Kögala, his running, his falling down were one motion; Çubak—the Çubak who had trampled Oogan ten times and toppled Kaşgar six—drove his knee into the dust in the middle of the steppe, drew the helm from his head, took it under his arm, and bowed:

— Manas! he said, and his voice came to his own ears like the voice of another. A camel found me in the desert, Kıdır gave me my name, an imam clothed me in my mail, a shrine gave me my horse—all of it, I understand now, was so that I might find you. Cast me into fire, I do not burn; cast me into water, I do not sink; but if I fall apart from you, I gutter out and die. Write me among your çoros. Is there room at your right hand?

Manas dismounted from Çoñ Kula. He walked to the kneeling hero, took him by both shoulders, raised him, and clasped him to his breast. The sound of those two baatırs' embrace, they say, startled the wild asses on the steppe of Samarkan.

— My right hand has been waiting for you, Çubak, said Manas. I saw you in my dream; I saw you as a lion. From this day forth, my flesh is your flesh, my blood your blood. May my joy be your joy, and your grief be my grief.

The çoros gathered round them; old Kırgıl clapped Çubak on the back, Acıbay bade him welcome, and young Sırgak took Kögala by the halter, his eyes shining brighter the longer he looked at the horse. That evening fires were kindled on the steppe, the kımız sacks were opened, a mare was slaughtered and a feast was laid; and into the ring of the forty çoros, one of its strongest stones was set that night. By the fire Çubak told all that had befallen him, thing by thing: the desert, the camel, the white felt; the footprint of Kıdır; the dream in the narrow cell of Mecca; the moonlight of the shrine of Baabedin; and Buhara, the golden field, the broken lance. He hid nothing; there was nothing left to hide. As he told of his defeat his voice failed for a moment, then he laughed himself:

— I threw down ten Oogans, and a girl threw down me, he said. It seems God sends the cure for pride by the most unlooked-for hand.

— Had you not been thrown, you would not have come here, said Bakay. Some heroes are brought by victory, some by defeat. Blessed be the road that brings them.

As he told his tale the çoros laughed, but Manas did not laugh. Manas was gazing beyond the flames of the fire, southward, toward where Buhara lay.

When the night had deepened and all had withdrawn to their felts, Manas came to Bakay's side and asked in a low voice:

— My elder, that girl... Temirkan's daughter. The sun of my dream, the one that rested in my palm. The one within the armor that broke Çubak's lance. One who has seen her— how would he describe her?

Bakay threw another branch on the fire; the sparks flew up toward the stars.

— She cannot be described, my Manas, he said. She is seen. I have not seen the girl; I have seen her renown; and renown is the smoke of the fire—consider for yourself the fire whose smoke rises so high. And there is the saying of the discerning: in buying a horse, look at its teeth; in taking a wife, look at her work. This girl's work was seen upon the field: her armor broke the lance, her blow threw the baatır. Such a one will hold her husband's house

the same way: unshakably. And when one goes to see her, one does not go empty-handed, one does not go narrow-hearted, one does not reckon the road short. Sleep now. No later than tomorrow, I shall begin to think out the ways and means of the suit. Buhara is far, they say; but the place where one's destiny lies, though it be at the other end of the world, is the foot of one's own threshold.

Manas stretched out on his felt, but sleep was long in coming. Through the eye of the smoke-ring a star was falling—toward the qibla. And in the deep silence of the steppe, amid the breathing of his forty çoros, Manas the panther closed his eyes thinking of that sun which rose from the qibla. The road, now, had turned toward Buhara.

CHAPTER 8

The Winning of Kanikey

— ❖ —

Evening settled over Talas like a weary bird. The water of the Keń-Kol had hushed its voice as it passed among the darkening stones, and the snowy summits of the Ala-Too held the last light and would not let it go. Smoke rose straight from the chimneys of the grey yurts, the horse herds were turning back to their folds, and the shepherds' whistling stretched out across the valley and died away. Only in the khan's horde-tent there was no peace.

Akılay's voice carried through the felt walls and out into the open. Akılay was the daughter of Şooruk khan; when her father was defeated she had been given as the portion of peace, taken without her heart being won. Taken unwilling, given unwilling—on a hearth so founded, the fire smokes much and warms little. When she served kımız she set the bowl down hard; when she laid the table her brows stayed knitted; when Manas's çoros

came through the door she turned her face away. That evening too, over a nothing—a bowl spilled, a word fell crooked—the inside of the tent had turned to ice.

Manas went outside. His kaftan thrown over his shoulder, his hands clasped behind him, he stood gazing at the sky where the stars were just beginning to show. Behind him, with heavy steps, came Bakay; he came and said nothing, and stood at his side. Bakay was like that: he knew the hour of a word, and did not open his mouth before the hour was full. The two men listened awhile to the murmur of the steppe.

— Uncle, said Manas at last, his voice full and deep as a stone striking the valley floor, if forty enemies came, my sword would meet them. If a strongman like Coloy came, my arm would serve. But against the cold behind that felt door I have no remedy. I have a house, but no hearth. I have a tent, but no home.

Bakay stroked his beard. His eyes burned in the dark like two coals.

— Khan, my child, he said, a horse is known by its bearing, a woman by her brow. The flower plucked by force withers at your breast; the rose asked for in due form is fragrant even in winter. You took Akılay as spoils of war; spoils have no heart to give. You need a wife who will keep your hearth, set your mornings right, and gather up what you leave behind. I know that wife.

Manas turned his head. On Bakay's face was that still radiance of men who have seen a distant thing.

— The youngest daughter of Temirkan, khan of Buhara, said Bakay. Her name does not travel on men's tongues, for her father guards her even from the eye. But those who have heard have heard: her hand is open, her heart is deep, her mind is a balance. No poor man turns empty from her door; they call her the eye of abundance; in the house she enters the kımız never runs short, and the fat of the slaughtered sheep never fails. And, khan my child, lend me your ear: last year a field of combat was raised on the plain of Buhara. The girl, her face veiled, took the lance in her hand. Whoever came into that field, she brought down from his horse.

From the shadow at hand came a low growl. Çubak was there; he had risen from the fireside and heard what was said. His broad shoulders trembled slightly—whether with shame or with laughter, who could say.

— Do not say "brought down," Bakay ake, said Çubak. Say "brought me down." I was in that field. Her lance touched my chest, the world turned, and I found myself in the grass.

I got up and looked: a girl, bolt upright on her horse, not even looking at me. From that day to this I do not ride toward Buhara.

The çoros laughed; Çubak laughed too, but in his eye there was a spark of reverence. Manas did not laugh. He looked into the distance, southwestward, into the darkness where Buhara lay. Something within him drew taut—like a bowstring.

— Then we shall ask for her in due form, he said. Whatever the kalıŋ is, it shall be paid; whatever suit is proper shall be sent. Not by force, but by rite. Send word to my father Cakıp: his son is marrying; let him prepare the kalıŋ.

Bakay's brows knitted for a moment—one single moment. He knew Cakıp. But he held his peace; custom was custom, and the kalıŋ came from the father.

The next morning Acıbay took horse. Acıbay was the çoro who knew tongues, knew roads, wove words like silk; embassies were his charge. He took two young men with him and set out for Cakıp's encampment.

Cakıp's camp lay below Talas, in a hollow rich with grass. The old man, they said, hid the count of his herds even from God; he had nine thousand horses, and nine thousand more that he never spoke of. When Acıbay arrived, Cakıp was before the fold, examining a barren mare's teeth. He returned the greeting, but his face did not smile. He invited the guest into the tent, that much he did—but he had the sourest of the kımız served, and the leanest cut of the meat set out.

Acıbay began according to form: he entered by way of lineage, came out by way of glory, and then brought the word to its true place:

— Cakıp bay, your son Manas wishes to take the daughter of Temirkan, khan of Buhara. Bakay stands ready to go as suitor; the çoros stand ready. Only the kalıŋ remains; and that comes from the father's wealth—so runs the custom. What will you set apart from the head of your herds?

Cakıp's face crumpled like earth cracking in winter. He set his bowl on the ground; as he set it down his hand was trembling—with anger or with miserliness none could tell; perhaps the two flowed from a single vein.

— Kalıŋ? he said. Kalıŋ for whom? For Manas? He does not count me a father—why should I count him a son? Has he asked after my wealth, has he looked at my herds, has he taken my hand and said, you have grown old? He feeds forty dogs—calls them çoros; he sits whoever crosses his path down at his table—calls them guests. My wealth was not brought

by the wind, that I should give it to the wind. No! I will not give a hair of my black colt; I will not give the tail of my barren mare. He must have Buhara's daughter—then let him have Buhara's gold as well. Go and tell him: I do not count Manas my son, and I will not give even my black colt!

Such a silence fell inside the tent that the teeth of the camels chewing their cud outside could be heard. Acıbay's face first flushed, then went white. No harm may touch an envoy, but an envoy's heart is not made of stone either. He rose slowly, put on his cap, and walked to the door. At the door he turned and spoke one word only:

— Cakıp bay, wealth stays with you, but a word walks abroad. What you say today comes back to meet you tomorrow.

And he went out. Behind him came Cakıp's growling; what he said could not be made out, nor did it need to be.

Acıbay returned to Talas empty-handed. To return empty is heavier than death to an envoy; his horse's head hung low, and he too was bowed. Before the horde-tent he found Manas, Bakay, and the çoros gathered. He did not bend or trim the message; what Cakıp had said, he said, and he did not swallow the words "not even my black colt," but spoke them.

Manas's face went dark. At his temple a vein swelled as though struck by a whip. He rose to his feet—when he rose, the tent-pole stood short beside him—but Bakay laid a hand on his wrist. That hand pressed down slowly, heavily, as though it held not a wrist but the halter of a maddened colt.

— Sit, khan my child, said Bakay. Against a father the sword is not raised; if raised, it does not cut; if it cuts, it cuts one's own hand. Let Cakıp's wealth be Cakıp's; wealth does not enter the grave, and if it did, it would grow no grass there. The kalıŋ I will pay.

— Uncle...

— I said I will pay it. Whatever I have gathered these forty years was for your head; it was so that your head might see bright days. A head sees no bright day without a hearth. Bring up the camels!

That day in Talas eighty camels were made to kneel. Bakay had the chests opened with his own hand; gold by the yambı, silk by the bale, otter furs, sable caps, saddles with silver trappings—all of it was weighed piece by piece, wrapped, and loaded. Heedless of his old knees, Bakay moved among the camels, drew the girths himself, tied the knots himself. The

çoros were ashamed and ran to help; still he did not draw back his hand. When evening came, the eighty camels stood laden like eighty small hills.

— The road is tomorrow, said Bakay. Buhara is far, the intent is near. May Kıdır go before us.

The road proved long. Leaving the green of Talas behind, the caravan first crossed the plain of the Çüy, then struck out over the sandy grey wastes. By day the sun hammered from above; by night the stars came down upon them with a freezing nearness. Bakay rode at the very front; his aged body was jolted in the saddle, but his back did not bend. At one halting-place one of the young çoros could hold back no longer and asked:

— Bakay ake, you gave eighty camel-loads of gold without blinking. Did you not grudge your wealth?

Bakay laughed; when he laughed, the lines of his face became the map of a deep valley.

— Son, he said, wealth is the snow that falls in winter: hold it where it lies and it melts away; let it flow and it becomes a spring; if it becomes a spring the people drink; if the people drink, a name remains. Cakıp is hoarding the snow; I am letting the water flow. Let us see whose pasture is green come spring.

They crossed the Sır-Derya at a shallow ford; the camels entered the water flinching, and the loads of gold passed over like a bridge stirring slowly upon the stream. On the evening of the eleventh day the gardens of Buhara appeared on the horizon as a dark line, and everyone in the caravan, without knowing why, lowered their voices.

✦ ✦ ✦

In Buhara, in Temirkan's palace, there was a dream that had gone untold for six months.

Temirkan had opened it to no one; only on certain mornings, before he went out to the divan, he was seen standing long at the east-facing window. In his dream the sun had come down from the sky and alighted in his palm; beside the sun a moon had appeared, and the two had embraced and settled upon Temirkan's roof. And from the roof a light had spread such that all the gardens of Buhara had come into fruit in that light. He had summoned no dream-reader; he had read his own dream himself. The sun must be a man, the moon a girl; the moon was in his house, the sun was on the road.

That morning the gatekeepers came running, out of breath: a caravan had appeared out of the east, eighty camels, at their head a white-bearded elder, behind him horsemen in tall caps. Temirkan rose from his throne and set his cap straight with his own hand.

— Open the gates, he said. And lay the great table. What I have awaited has come.

The viziers exchanged glances; so far as they knew, the khan awaited no one. But Temirkan had been waiting six months.

When Bakay rode in through the city gate, the crowds of Buhara parted to either side. The elder dismounted slowly, took three steps toward Temirkan, and laid his hand on his breast:

— Temirkan, my word is short, my intent is long. We come from Talas. You will have heard the name of Manas, son of Cakıp; if you have not, ask the steppe—it will tell you. For Manas—the black-maned lion, the shield of his people, the elder brother of orphans—we come as suitors for your daughter. Eighty camel-loads—it is the kalıŋ, offered for your acceptance. The word is yours.

Temirkan took Bakay's hand in both of his own. His eyes were full; for a khan's eyes to fill was counted shameful, yet that day no one counted it so.

— Elder ake, he said, six months ago I dreamed a dream: the sun came down into my palm, and beside it there was a moon. Six months I have watched the road for that sun. You have brought the kalıŋ—but I gave my daughter already, in the dream; you have come only to set the seal upon it. My word is my word, my oath my oath: my daughter belongs to Manas.

A white sheep was slaughtered, its blood fell to the earth, the oath was sworn. Temirkan and Bakay, two white beards, locked their two hands together; and those locked hands bound that day not two khanates but the fate of three generations to come—though neither of them knew it that day; and had they known, neither would have drawn back.

The news flew to Talas. Manas took his forty çoros—Almambet at his right, Çubak at his left, Sırgak in the van, Acıbay bearing the word—and covered the road to Buhara in three days; three days and three nights they rode, changing horses, and on the fourth morning the minarets of Buhara came into view. The city met them like a wedding-house: the rooftops full, the roads full, children running before the horses.

On the high gallery overlooking the inner courtyard of the palace, behind a curtain, stood a girl. Forty girls dressed in red were about her, but she alone was looking through

the slit of the curtain. She saw the man dismounting below: his stature over-topping the gate, his shoulders two men wide, his walk the swaying of a lion; the eyes beneath his cap were of the kind that weigh a whole courtyard in a single glance. For an instant the man lifted his head—he could not have seen the curtain, could never have seen the girl—yet he seemed to look exactly at that slit.

The girl's hand went, unbidden, to her breast. What passed within her she told no one; nor would she ever. Only that night, to her nurse, as she worked her silk, without raising her head, she said one sentence:

— My father's dream was true.

Thirty days there were games, forty days the feast. Cauldrons boiled, kımız flowed like a flood, strongmen wrestled, horses were raced, the bards sang. One day a field of combat was raised; the champions of Buhara and the çoros of Talas took hold in wrestling. When Çubak stepped into the field a murmur ran through the crowd—there were those who remembered him. Çubak won his bout and hoisted his opponent across his shoulders; but as he left the field he lifted his head toward the gallery and touched his cap; those who knew, knew to whom he touched it, and Buhara laughed—laughed with a good heart.

One evening amid the feasting, at Temirkan's great table, bride and groom were seated face to face for the first time, as custom ordained. Kanıkey's face was unveiled now; Manas looked at her, and this man whose hand had never once faltered on field, in battle, or at the hunt, spilled a little of a bowl of kımız as he set it down. Kanıkey saw it; she let it pass unseen. Then, when her turn to speak came, she spoke without lowering her eyes; her voice was neither loud nor soft:

— Baatır, they told me you have forty çoros, and that you set meat before every one of them with your own hand. They told me that when you see an orphan you dismount, and when you see a hungry man you rise from your own table. It is not to riches that I am coming; riches there were in my father's house also. It is to that table that I am coming. Let your table remain ever so; it is enough.

That night, on the way back to his tent, Manas said only this to Almambet:

— My uncle Bakay knew, once again.

And one morning, at dawn, Temirkan sent his daughter forth. The girl's dowry was loaded on ninety camels; but the true dowry Temirkan gave was not in the loads. He kissed his daughter's brow and bent to her ear:

— My daughter, he said, you are a khan's wife now; from this day let your name too be spoken so. In the place you are going, let patience be your shield and wisdom your sword. A husband is a mountain: on a mountain there are blizzards, and there is snow. Be the mountain's water; the blizzard dies down, the snow melts, the water remains.

The girl—the girl whom all would henceforth call Kanıkey—kissed her father's hand and mounted her horse with grave dignity. She looked back once: the gardens of Buhara, the minarets, her childhood. She looked once, and did not look again. She turned her face to the north, to Talas, to the life she did not know.

The bridal caravan moved slowly: ninety camels, forty girls, a hundred horsemen. At the halting-places Kanıkey seldom left her tent, but when she did she was not idle: one evening her own hand touched the cooks' cauldron, and that evening the taste of the food changed; one morning she herself knelt to examine the foot of a camel gone lame on the road, and drew out with her own fingers the thorn sunk in its sole. The çoros saw these things, looked at one another, and said nothing. One night by the fire Sırgak could contain himself no longer:

— This lady, he said, was raised like a khan's daughter and works like a shepherd's. Such a one I have neither seen nor heard of.

Acıbay, stirring the embers, answered in a low voice:

— The eye of abundance, Bakay ake called her. An eye, my son, sees. This lady sees everything; the wonder is that what she sees, her hand can do.

Talas met them with the smell of kımız. Çıyırdı embraced her daughter-in-law before the horde-tent; embraced her, and with all the experience of a mother's heart took the measure of the girl—the straightness of her shoulders, the stillness of her gaze, the warmth of her hand—and said within herself, "this girl will bear burdens," said, "this girl will bear many burdens." Into her joy there seeped one drop of ache, and she could not explain the reason even to herself.

Akılay stood at a distance. From the shadows she watched the new bride pass; on her face was neither hatred nor love—only a weariness that belonged to no one. Kanıkey saw her. The next day, asking leave of no one, she went to Akılay's tent with a bowl of saba kımız in her hand and a bolt of Buhara silk; she stopped at the threshold and bowed her head:

— Elder sister, she said, I have come late to this homeland. Its ways and customs are yours to teach; teach me, and I will learn.

Akılay's lips moved; she could say nothing. She took the silk; she drank the kımız. From that day the two women did not become friends, perhaps, but neither did they become enemies; on the steppe this was called peace, and peace outlives friendship.

Cakıp too came one day; not to come was impossible—what would the people say? When he entered the bride's tent his face was the face of a man come to call in a debt. Kanıkey met him at the threshold, bowed her head, seated him in the place of honor, set the kazı before him with her own hand, and served him the first and best kımız of the saba; father-in-law, she said, and in her voice there was neither reproach nor coldness. Cakıp ate, drank, said nothing. As he was leaving, standing at his horse's head, looking at no one, he muttered: — At least Buhara's daughter has manners... Whether she was worth the kalıŋ, time will show. He still kept the account of the unpaid kalıŋ out of his own purse; a miser's ledger does not close until he dies.

✦ ✦ ✦

That year summer came early and the hunting was rich. From one hunt the çoros returned with a strange thing: in Sırgak's arms was a pup that resembled no sheepdog, resembled no hound, resembled no wolf at all. They had found it among the rocks; above their heads a kumay—that vulture-born bird whose wing blots out the sun—had circled three times and then vanished into the sky. The pup's eyes were open, and it looked at a man's face; a pup's eyes do not look so.

When Bakay saw the pup he rose from his place. He bent down, felt the hair at the scruff of its neck, opened its mouth and looked at its palate, then straightened; his face was the face of a man who has read a blessed writing.

— This is Kumayık, he said. Born of the kumay, the holy pup granted to one servant of God in forty. If he grows, no tulpar can overtake him, no lion can stand before him; no wolf will come near the herds, no enemy will steal upon the homeland. But listen well: Kumayık does not grow in every hand. Let an unclean hand touch him, he sickens; let a lying breath touch him, he fades. Only a pure woman can raise him—pure of hand, pure of

tongue, pure of heart. In the wrong hands he dies; and when he dies, the kut goes with him.

The inside of the tent fell silent. The eyes, one by one, whether they would or no, turned to Kanıkey. Kanıkey raised her head from the silk she was working; she did not flee those gazes.

Manas carried the pup to her with his own hands. But the trust extended with love came weighted with heavy terms; Manas's voice was as though he were commanding not his wife but one of his çoros:

— Take him; raise him. But know this: this pup is my kut. If harm comes to a hair of him, if the light of his eye dims, if the tip of his tail is hurt—I will not care that you are my wife. If the kut goes, you go too.

It was a heavy word; those in the tent looked at the ground. Bakay made to say something, and did not; perhaps he should have. Kanıkey took the pup into her arms. The pup, that small, warm, trembling creature, nestled into her bosom and learned her scent in a single breath. Kanıkey bowed her head:

— Your trust is my trust, she said. She said no other word.

From that day Kanıkey's nights were divided. She showed the pup to no one, let no one's hand touch him; for fear of the evil eye, the ill word, the unclean hand, she made him a nest of felt in the deepest corner of her own tent. She milked the milk herself, warmed it herself, dropped it herself into the pup's mouth—once at midnight, once at daybreak, once at mid-morning. When the pup fell sick she did not sleep for three days and three nights, carried him in her bosom, warmed him with her breath. And by day her bride's service never slackened: the cauldron was hers, the table hers, the guest hers. No one saw her weariness, for she did not show it; only the hollows beneath her eyes, as the months passed, darkened.

One night Çıyırdı, unable to sleep, was passing before the bride's tent when she heard a murmuring within; she did not look through the gap in the felt—to look would not have been seemly—but she stopped and listened. Kanıkey was singing the pup a lullaby; a low, husky lullaby in the speech of Buhara. The lullaby of a sleepless woman, in the middle of the night, to the young of an animal. Çıyırdı thought about it until morning. In the morning she looked at the shadows beneath her daughter-in-law's eyes and asked nothing; only that day she went early to the head of the cauldron and, without ever seeming to, took

half of Kanıkey's work upon herself. And so this silent covenant between the two women was made, without one word being spent.

Kumayık grew. In six months he was the size of a year-old dog; his coat took on a sheen of silver, his chest broadened, his gaze deepened. He walked behind Kanıkey like her shadow, stretched out at her knee when she sat, and the hair of his neck rose at the scent of a stranger. Every time Manas saw him his chest swelled and he said, "my kut is walking"; but of the nights that had raised the pup he never asked. It did not occur to him to ask. Men are so: they drink from the spring and do not ask after its source.

Winter had set in. One evening a great root was crackling in the hearth at the center of the tent, a few of the çoros were waiting for the meat to cook, and outside the blizzard was beating the felt. Kanıkey was pouring kımız for the guests; both of her hands were full. Kumayık, grown used to the warmth, lay drowsing near the hearth. And out of the fire—no one seeing it, for who could have seen—a live coal leapt.

The smell of burning and a cry of pain broke out in the same instant. Kumayık sprang up, spun, chased his own tail; the tip of his tail had caught, the fur was aflame. Kanıkey dropped what was in her hands, flung herself forward, and smothered the fire with her bare palm—her palm burned; she did not feel it. But the harm was done: the tip of the tail, one tuft, was scorched.

Manas came through the door at just that moment. What he saw was this: his kut, his holy pup, smoking, whimpering with pain; and his wife standing over it. Blood came down over his eyes. The world narrowed, reason withdrew, and black wrath sat down in its place —that wrath which was at once Manas's sword and Manas's curse, death to the enemy, calamity to the friend.

— I gave him into your trust! he thundered; the posts of the tent shook. Not one task do you hold, not one trust do you keep!

And he kicked her. Once. Kanıkey fell doubled to the ground; even as she fell she did not cry out, only her breath was cut short. In her side something—two things—cracked like dry branches; two of her ribs were broken. The çoros froze; the hands waiting for meat hung in the air; Kumayık, his pain forgotten, laid back his ears and snarled at Manas—the holy pup snarled at his master, for the first time and the last.

Silence. The blizzard beating the felt. The crackle of the hearth.

Kanıkey rose. Slowly, very slowly, she rose; one hand pressed to her side, yet her back, when she stood, was straight as before. Her face was like lime, beads of sweat stood on her brow; her eyes were dry. She looked into Manas's face—without flinching, without pleading, without accusing—and said:

— The fault is mine, my khan. My eye was on him; my hand was not quick enough. It will not happen again.

She said no other word. With her burned palm she gathered up the pup, salved his tail herself, bound it herself; then she picked up the fallen bowls and set kımız before the guests anew. Her side was a knife-thrust at every bending; no one knew. That night, when all were asleep, in the depth of her tent she bound her own ribs with a silk sash, with her own hand, her teeth clenched. If she wept, only the felt walls heard; felt keeps secrets.

Manas did not sleep that night. In the emptiness left when his wrath had ebbed, something—a thing he could not name—kept stirring. Was it shame? Men do not know that word, and knowing it, do not speak it. Toward morning he went to Bakay's tent; he did not enter, but stood at the threshold. Bakay was awake; the old sleep little.

— Uncle, said Manas, into the darkness. Last night I...

— I know, said Bakay. His voice was tired; for the first time it was an old man's voice. Khan my child, I will say a word to you; lay it not in your ear but in your heart: last night you kicked your kut. Not the pup—that woman is your kut. The pup will guard you at the hunt; that woman will guard you everywhere. A day will come—I pray it never comes, but it will come—when it is she who will gather up what you leave behind, she who will keep your name alive, she who will... — Bakay stopped; something knotted in his throat, and he did not say the rest. — Go, sleep. And if you ever raise your hand to that woman again, you will find me standing before you.

Manas turned from the threshold. When he entered his own tent, Kanıkey seemed to be sleeping; Kumayık in her bosom, the bandaged tail outside the covers. Manas looked at the two of them a long, long time. Then, over his wife's feet, gently, he laid his own kaftan. Kanıkey was not sleeping. Her eyes closed, her breath even, her side on fire—she was not sleeping, and she felt the weight of the kaftan laid over her. What passed within her, no one ever knew; perhaps this passed: on a mountain there are blizzards, and there is snow; you be the water.

The ribs knitted in forty days. Kumayık's tail feathered out again; the fur over the burn came in white—and that whiteness remained all his life, like a mark, at the tip of his tail. In the spring Kanıkey was at the head of the cauldron again, again at the table, again with the guests. No one spoke of that winter night again; not speaking of it was also a way of binding a wound, on the steppe.

That spring a new work began in Kanıkey's tent; no one had ordered it, she began it herself. She brought out the needles, the silks, the strips of rawhide that had come from Buhara in her dowry, and set herself to sewing. First she unpicked the lining of Manas's kaftan and sewed it anew—with such a stitch that a sword's graze could not tear it nor driving rain pass through. Then, letting no one notice, she fitted an inner layer of felt into each of the çoros' caps. Her hands were never seen idle; even while her ribs were still bound, her fingers worked. One day Bakay stopped by the tent, looked at what was being sewn, looked at the closeness of the stitching, and understood something; he showed that he understood only by the mist that came over his eyes. This woman was not sewing for the winter; this woman had sensed the blizzard of years yet to come and was making ready against it—for all forty çoros at once.

— My daughter, said Bakay as he left, pausing at the threshold, your needle is sharper than many a sword.

Kanıkey did not lift her head from her work; only at the corner of her lip, for an instant, a shadow of a smile passed.

But something had changed. The çoros now touched their caps as they passed before Kanıkey. Çıyırdı, looking at her daughter-in-law, no longer said within herself only "she will bear burdens"; she said, "it is she who will bear this homeland." And the women of Talas, as their troubles found them, learned one by one and two by two the way to her tent.

As for Kanıkey, at night, when everyone slept, she would sometimes go outside and gaze into the snow-covered darkness of the Ala-Too. For her dreams had begun. Tangled dreams, without edge or end: sometimes she saw a breaking banner, a bleeding spring, her ninety camel-loads of dowry being untied and scattered one by one, and—this most often —a solitary lamp burning in a hollow of rock that no one knew. Waking, she would try to read them, and could not. Years later she would read them; years later she would see, one by one, what that lamp was, what that hollow would hide, and who would come forth arrayed for war in the wind of armies. For now she only shivered, and went back in, and slept pressed close to Kumayık's warmth.

When summer came and the move to the high pastures was made ready, another murmur began in the horde. Messengers were coming from Kökötöy khan; word of this and that was carried back and forth; but the true murmur was within. At table one evening Çubak, with a courage the kımız too had lent him, raised his voice: they were disputing who should sit at the head, who should ride at the fore, and Çubak's eye was on Almambet, seated at Manas's right.

— Shall one who came late to this homeland, said Çubak, dropping the words one by one like stones, pass ahead of one born of it?

Almambet slowly raised his head. He said nothing. But in his gaze there opened such an abyss, such a bottomless loneliness, that the voice of the table was cut off; Kanıkey, kımız bowl in hand, saw the invisible bowstring drawn taut between the two men, and her heart tightened. Manas knit his brows, said a word, and closed the matter; but a word closed over is like an ember buried—beneath the felt it burns and burns within.

That night Kanıkey dreamed again: two tulpars, on the two banks of a ravine, neighing to one another; the ravine was deep, and along its floor ran a black water. She woke, sat up, and stayed long in the darkness. Let morning come, she said within herself, let morning come—Bakay must be consulted. If the rift between these two men were not filled in time, that black water would carry them all away.

Dawn was breaking behind the Ala-Too, like a red wound.

CHAPTER 9

The Clash of Almambet and Çubak, and Almambet's Jomok

— ❖ —

The news fell upon Talas before the sun had risen: twelve Muslim khans had gathered twelve san of soldiers, unfurled the black banner of envy, and were marching against Manas. A shudder passed over the encampments like the shadow of a crane startling a school of minnows. The shepherds drew their flocks into the mouths of the mountains, the women bound the felt doors fast, the forty çoro tightened the girths of their horses. Only on the face of Manas was there neither a shadow nor a crease; he came out before the ordo, stood beside grey-maned Akkula, and gazed into the distance.

— If those who come are guests, let the kumis be ready, he said. If those who come are enemies, let the sword be ready. We know how to welcome both.

Bakay stroked his white beard and smiled. The old wolf knew the wind by its scent.

— An army that marches on envy, he said, thinks three times on the road. Before it reaches Talas, the fire of discord will have turned to ash. Pitch your tent wide, hang your cauldron deep, and the steppe will settle the rest.

And so it was. When the twelve khans descended upon the plain of Talas from twelve directions, they found before them not an army of bared swords but cauldrons whose smoke climbed to the sky, mares tethered in long rows, white-bearded elders drawn up in ranks before the grey yurts. Manas met them without retreating one step or advancing one span; he stood where he was, as a mountain stands. And whatever was within the khans — envy, rancour, old reckonings — melted before that stance and turned into something else. For discord is a beast that feeds in darkness; when it sees the face of day it takes fright and changes its shape.

The eldest of the khans dismounted, tucked his whip under his arm, and walked forward.

— Manas, he said, may our tongues wither if we lie: when we set out there was crookedness in our hearts. But when we entered Talas we saw that you are no enemy to us; the enemy is Konurbay, who sits in the east and lays the whip across all our backs. We have come to be an arm to you against Beecin, against Konurbay. Take us; join us to the rear of your army.

Manas was silent for a time. His silence weighed heavier than his speech.

— If one who enters my door by guile, he said at last, leaves my door as a friend, then I bestow that guile upon the wind of the steppe. Dismount from your horses. From this day forward our flesh is one, our bone is one. The road to Beecin is long; on that road not only the body but the heart must endure.

That day an eighty-day feasting began in Talas. For eighty days the cauldrons never came down, for eighty days the kumis was milked, for eighty days the twelve san of soldiers were fed full and warmed at the back. But the true work of those eighty days turned not in the feast but in the tent of Kanıkey. The stately wife of Manas, son of Cakıp, added the day when the night ran short and added candlelight when the day ran short, and with her single hand she was fitting out twelve san of troops. She had gathered the masters about her, had hides tanned, felt beaten, iron tempered. Garments were sewn that no arrow could pierce; tightly woven, quilted layer upon layer, wrapping breast to breast and back to back. Horses were chosen; the swift for swiftness, the hardy for hardiness, the noblest of the herd, fit to endure the snow of winter and the sand of summer. And the kül provisions were prepared:

roasted and pounded, pressed into bags, a single handful carrying a man through a day — travel fare that would not spoil and would not weigh. Kanıkey weighed every bag with her own hand, tested every girth with her own eye.

— A man dies on the field, she said to the women, but let him not die hungry, let him not die cold. This is the portion that falls to us.

The women sewed by day and sewed by night; their fingers were pierced through and through by the needle, and no one uttered a sigh. The granaries were emptied, the chests were opened; Kanıkey had even the silk of her own dowry cut and set into the lining of a soldier's coat. Over Talas, through those eighty days, the sound of beaten felt, of boiling cauldrons, of bellowed hearths never ceased. And a strange thing happened: the soldiers of the twelve khans who had come by guile, seeing the hand of this lady who fitted them out with such care, let go the last crumb of doubt within them. For a soldier understands less from the word of a khan than from the stitching of the garment cut for him; if the stitch is tight, the cause is sound.

When the day of departure came, Kanıkey had the deepest chest of her tent opened. From it she drew forth a kaftan at the sight of which tongues were struck dumb: Akolpok. Twelve years it had been in the sewing; for twelve years the needle had entered, the thread had run, and layer upon layer of silk, layer upon layer of cotton, layer upon layer of secret had been laid within. No sword could cut it, no arrow pierce it; it warmed in the cold and kept cool in the heat. Kanıkey lifted the kaftan with both hands and set it upon the shoulders of Manas; then she placed Akkelte, that rifle of legend, the trust whose barrel smelled of smoke, into her husband's hand.

— For twelve years I have worked a prayer into every stitch of this, she said. Let my prayer go with you, and you come back to me. I shall wait alive at the door; you come back alive from the road.

Something knotted in Manas's throat; manhood is knowing how to swallow that knot. He swallowed it, bowed his head, kissed his lady's brow. Then he turned and cried out before the army in his great voice:

— Men! The road is long, the enemy is hard. This army needs a head; a head other than me, for I am khan, but I do not know the roads of Beecin. There is among us a man who ruled as khan in Beecin for twenty-one years, who knows the stones and waters of that land by heart: Almambet! He knows where the water may be drunk, where the pass may be

crossed, where the enemy will strike. I have chosen him khan over the army. Let him who accepts raise his whip!

For an instant — a brief instant, small as a needle's point — the army was silent. Then the whips rose to the sky, and the roar echoed from the slopes of the Ala-Too. But in that needle-point of silence there was something; Bakay heard it, Kanıkey heard it, perhaps Manas heard it too but pretended not to. Among the forty çoro a few eyes had turned to the ground. And Çubak's jaw had locked like a rock.

✦ ✦ ✦

The army flowed eastward; twelve san of soldiers, the forty çoro, the standard before and the baggage behind, flowing for days. They swallowed the dust of the Altay road, breathed the frost of the snow passes, marched by night under the stars and by day on the back of the sun. Keñ-Kol fell behind, Çüy fell behind; the familiar pastures ended, the foreign stones began. At the halting places the kül provisions were opened; a handful carried a man through a day, and the name of Kanıkey was spoken at every meal like a prayer. By the time they reached the halt called Tal-Mazar, the horses had lost their fettle and the men had grown silent. A long road brings to the surface whatever is inside a warrior; if there is goodness, goodness, and if there is a boil, a boil.

The boil burst through the tongue of old Kırgıl.

The aged çoro, chewing his whitening moustache, sidled up to Çubak. It was by the fire; the army had made camp, and Almambet had ridden ahead on reconnaissance — as khan, he had given his first order to himself and taken the most dangerous task upon his own shoulders. But Kırgıl did not tell it so.

— Do you see, Çubak, he said, his voice dry as a snake's skin. Reconnaissance is a man's honour. He who rides in the van strikes the first sword and takes the first glory. To whom did Manas give that honour? To you? To me? No. To one who came yesterday, joined yesterday, whose blood is not ours and whose faith is an afterthought — to him he gave it. You who were the right arm of Manas, will you now swallow dust behind a Kıtay?

A vein began to beat at Çubak's temple. A voice within him said, do not listen; but another voice — older, hungrier — said, but what if it is true? Thus does envy enter a man: not by the door, but through the crack.

— Be silent, old man, he said, but there was no silencing power in his voice.

— I shall be silent, said Kırgıl, I shall be silent, but the army will not. Already they whisper: Çubak's boots have been thrown to the roof, they say. When we come to Beecin, who knows — perhaps Almambet will find his old friends and throw us to the wolves and the birds. A Kıtay is a Kıtay, my son; a wolf does not become a dog — at best it wears a dog's hide.

Three times Kırgıl spoke, three times he freshened the poison, and at the third Çubak sprang to his feet. He leapt upon his horse, laid on the whip, and rode into the night, after Almambet. Whether the thing growing within him was anger, or envy, or a hole the weariness of the long road had found — he did not know; and because he did not know, he could not stop it.

He found Almambet upon a ridge; the man chosen khan was alone, reading the enemy road by moonlight. Hearing hoofbeats he turned, and when he knew who came, his face brightened:

— Çubak! Scouting alone was hard; how good that you have come...

— I did not come to trail behind you, Kıtay slave! Çubak cut him short. His voice was foreign even to his own ear. Who are you, to ride before me? You ruled as khan in Beecin — then rule in Beecin! This is the army of the Kirghiz. If he who came yesterday is made head today, what becomes of the trueborn sons? Turn back, fall in behind me, or else...

The light drained from Almambet's face; what came in its place was not darkness but something worse: the ash of an old, a very old pain. But beneath the ash there was an ember.

— Did you say slave, he said slowly. I, who kicked away my throne and came... I, who laid my father's head upon the road of the faith... Did you say slave to me, Çubak?

— I said slave! Kıtay slave!

The swords were drawn in the same instant. The moonlight broke twice on the two steels. The horses reared, the sound of the first clash split the night — and that sound reached the ear of the one man in the camp who was not sleeping. Manas leapt bareback onto Akkula and crossed the plain in a single surge; when he arrived, the two warriors were rising to the third stroke. Manas drew no sword and gave no shout; he drove Akkula between the two of them, seized the bridles of both horses in his two hands, and seized

them so that both horses were nailed where they stood and both swords hung arrested in the air.

— Lower them, he said. His voice was low; and his low voice was more terrible than thunder. Lower the swords. An army that spills its own blood before reaching Beecin has no need of Konurbay; that army is its own Konurbay.

The two swords came down. Manas looked at them both; long, and one by one, he looked.

— Çubak, he said. You are my right arm; if my arm strikes my heart, what becomes of me? He who calls Almambet slave has called me slave; for I called him "my brother." And you, Almambet — know this too: within this army there are old men with poisoned tongues, but there are also warriors whose hearts are with you. Let the filth of one tongue not blot the whiteness of a thousand hearts.

The night wind blew; it bent the grasses of the ridge and tossed the manes of the two warriors. Çubak dismounted first. He unfastened his whip and hung it about his neck — the oldest custom of the steppe: he who hangs the whip about his neck has said, "my guilt upon my neck, the judgment in your hand." Almambet dismounted too; he too hung his whip about his neck. The two men stood face to face in the moonlight, whips about their necks.

— It was as if my tongue tore loose, said Çubak, when I spoke that word. It was Kırgıl's poison, and it flowed through my mouth; but the mouth that let it flow is my mouth. Forgive me, Almambet. From this day forward, let my blood be your blood.

— I have forgiven already, said Almambet. You struck me with the word "Kıtay"; but that wound was opened before you were born, Çubak. You only trod upon it.

Manas joined their hands together and laid his own hand over them.

— Swear the oath, he said. Be comrades in this world and brothers of the next.

— We are brothers of the next world, said the two with one mouth.

The night wind took the oath of the three men and scattered it over the steppe. The steppe does not forget; a spoken oath is kept in the pass that is crossed, the water that is drunk, the fire that is kindled, and when its day comes it is demanded of its owner.

And they turned back, three riders side by side, and rode to the camp. But a knot remained within Manas: Almambet's words, "that wound was opened before you were

born." That night a great fire was kindled at the halting place; Bakay came, Sırgak came, the çoro formed a ring. Manas turned to Almambet:

— My brother, he said. We have seen your wound; we have not seen your blood. This army will march to Beecin with you; those who march should know who it is that rides before them. Tell it. Who are you, from what stock were you torn, by what roads did you come to us? Speak your jomok; the night is long, and the ears are many.

Almambet looked into the fire. He saw things within the flame; perhaps the towers of Beecin, perhaps a woman's face. Then he began — and once begun, he told in a single night what eighty days of feasting, eighty halts, eighty quarrels could never tell.

✦ ✦ ✦

In our lands they call such a telling a jomok, he said. But mine is no tale; beneath its every word lies either a grave or a wound. Listen, then.

— My name was set upon me before I was born, said Almambet. The star-counters of Beecin, the soothsayers of Esenkan, looked at the sky and trembled: "A son will be born of the line of Azizkan; if he is born, he will bring Beecin down." My father Azizkan was one of the khans bound to Beecin; when this word reached his ear, the pillars of his palace shook. My mother Altınay was young then, and barren; for years no child had come to her. While she sought a cure for her grief, one night — my mother used to tell this, and her voice always failed when she told it — one night a light entered her tent. It came not by the door and not by the smoke-hole; it simply entered, like radiance, like water. My mother believed that she conceived of that light. Whoever she told it to laughed; but my mother knew. A mother knows whence comes the thing in her womb.

— When I was born, my father was caught between two things: the word of the soothsayers on one side, the son in his arms on the other. He did not kill me; he could not. But the custom of Beecin is merciless: the sons of khans are given to the school of the sixty-headed dragon. At the bottom of Lake Averden, they say, is that school; by others' telling, a black cave on the lake's shore. Thousands of children enter, a handful come out. The learning the dragon teaches is the learning of sorcery: to milk the clouds, to bring down rain with the black stone, to spread mist like a quilt, to turn the world upside down in an enemy's eye — all this they drill into you there. And as they drill it, they break you; the

child who cannot bear it, the lake swallows. Six years I stayed in that darkness. Six years I saw no face of day, six years I smelled no mother's scent, six years I lay down to sleep thinking "perhaps I shall not wake." There were nights when the children lying beside me did not last until morning; I cannot count their names — if I counted them, this night would not end. I came out. Why I? I do not know. Perhaps by my mother's light, perhaps by the soothsayers' fear; a child who is feared dies hard.

The fire crackled. The çoro had turned to stone; Çubak was staring at his knees.

— I came out of the school, became a man, sat at my father's right hand. Twenty-one years I ruled as khan in Beecin; my command ran, my word cut. Konurbay I have known since those days: his ambition is greater than his stature, and his hatred greater than his ambition. I had everything — throne, herds, gold, a name. One night I dreamed. In my dream came a white-bearded dervish; in his hand was neither sword nor book, only a light. "Almambet," he said, "the idol you worship has no ear and no eye; know Him who created you." I awoke, my shirt plastered to my back with sweat. Another night he came, and another night. On the morning after the third night I rose, opened the door of the house where the idols stood, and looked: stone. Painted stone. No ear, no eye. That morning I spoke the word of faith; with no one hearing, alone, in the heart of Beecin, I became a Muslim.

— I hid it; hidden faith is like fire in the ember — it must give smoke. I opened myself first to my mother. Altınay listened, wept, said, "So this was your light," and she too believed. Then I went to my father. He was sitting on his throne; beside him his idol — cast in gold, its eyes of ruby. "Father," I said, "this stone neither begot you nor fed you. Come, turn to the Creator." My father looked at me; I swear, for a moment I saw a softening in his eye. But then he stretched out his hand and clasped his idol. "I shall die in the faith of my fathers," he said, "and in that faith I shall kill you too. Either you turn and repent, or I strike off the head of my own son." He drew his sword. A father's sword weighs heavy upon a son; but the son's faith weighed heavier than the father's sword. We fought. Before the throne we fought; his idol toppled, its ruby eyes rolled upon the floor. And I... I struck off the head of my father Azizkan upon the very throne where he sat.

Almambet fell silent. Even the voice of the fire seemed to sink low. Manas's chin had fallen to his chest; Bakay had closed his eyes; on the cheeks of young Sırgak two wet lines glistened.

— Do not curse me, said Almambet, his voice like gravel. I have done to myself all that was needed. Thirty years have passed, and that head enters my dreams every night. I gave it for the faith; gave it, yes — but it is a father's head, and nothing can be set in its place. Çubak, my brother — you called me "Kıtay slave." There were those who thought I cut down my father because I am Kıtay, and those who said I changed my faith because I wanted the throne. I wanted only one thing: to be the slave of a Creator who has an ear, who has an eye, who knows my heart. I was no slave to the Kıtay, I was no slave to my own father — that is why the word slave falls heavy on me.

Çubak rose from his place, crossed through the middle of the ring, knelt down before Almambet, and once more, this time before all, hung his whip about his neck. Almambet raised him by the shoulders and pressed him to his breast. No one said anything; the word that needed saying had already been said between the two of them.

— Tell the rest as well, said Bakay softly. You have opened the mouth of the wound; show its bottom too, that it may heal.

✦ ✦ ✦

— When my father's head fell, Beecin rose up, said Almambet. Esenkan sent forth his command, Konurbay came against me with an army. My mother Altınay — a lady, they say, sits in the tent; my mother was not so. She girded on armour, mounted a horse, and fought at my right hand. She fought like a man; she chased those who fled and met those who came. Three days and three nights we fought, and for three days and three nights the roads of Beecin ran with blood. In the late afternoon of the third day, Kococaş — Konurbay's marksman, falcon-eyed, stone-hearted — saw my mother from a height. The bullet entered at the joint of her armour. My mother did not fall from her horse; she bent over its neck, looked at me, said, "Ride on, my son; do not look back." Then she fell. I buried my mother on the field of battle; I could not even set a stone upon her grave — I covered its trace with grass, lest the enemy trample it. My mother Altınay, the woman who conceived of light, lies in the black earth; she is a martyr, and her place is light — if I did not believe this, I could not sit at this fire.

— I broke away from Beecin; and whither rolls a stone that breaks away? I did not know. Behind me was a burning city, before me steppes whose names I did not know. I

crossed the Sarı-Arka; over that endless yellow sea I rode alone for days, with no companion but my shadow, no sound but my horse's breathing. I saw the Sır-Derya, drank of its water, asked the road of travellers bound for Buhara; at last I came to the land of Kökçö the Kazak. Kökçö received me well; I will not deny his due — six years I ate his bread, six years I herded his horses, ordered his army, broke his enemies. But for one such as I, a stranger's door is always a stranger's door. I fattened the herds — "Kıtay sorcery," they said. I won the war — "Kıtay cunning," they said. In the end the slander climbed all the way to Kökçö's ear: "Almambet has set his eye upon your wife, has whetted his teeth for your throne," they said. It was a lie; a lie has no proof, but it has an echo. When Kökçö's face turned to me, it was no longer the old face. One night a trap was laid; I was called to the table, and behind the table swords were waiting. It was Akerkeç who saved me — Kökçö's wife, a wise lady. She sent word in secret: "Do not go tonight, and do not stay tomorrow. There is no bread left for you in this land. But listen: in Talas, they say, there is a man named Manas; he has forty çoro, his door stands open to the stranger, his table is laid for the orphan. Wounded warriors find their way there. Go, ride; the cure for your grief is there."

Almambet lifted his head and looked across the fire at Manas.

— Thus I came to you, Manas. Throneless, motherless, fatherless, landless. I had a horse, a sword, and on my back a load of thirty years. You saw me at your door; you did not say "who are you," you did not say "of whom are you born" — you said "welcome, my brother." If the Kirghiz have made me khan, it is for Manas's sake, I know. But know this too, çoro: I do not ride on this campaign for glory. In Beecin lies my mother's grave, covered over with grass; there is my father's head, which I cut off; there are the bones of thousands of broken children. I go to demand the reckoning — of Konurbay, of Esenkan, of that sixty-headed darkness. I asked to ride in the van because I know the road; not for honour. If it is honour, take it, it is yours; the road is enough for me.

A long silence fell upon the ring. Then old Kırgıl — the greybeard who had poured out the poison — rose slowly to his feet. His knees cracked; or perhaps not his knees, but something within him.

— It was I who poured out this discord, he said. I have grown old, my eye has narrowed, and a narrowed eye sees an enemy in every comer. Almambet, do not look upon this white beard; beneath it I carried a black heart this night. Grant me your pardon. But let me say this too, and let all of you hear it: words are spoken beautifully, and every man of valour speaks beautifully. You say you ruled as khan in Beecin for twenty-one years; where

then are your tons of gold, the treasures you have counted? Whether what you have told is dream or truth — how am I to know?

A murmur ran through the army; but Almambet raised his hand.

— The old man speaks rightly, he said. A word demands no proof; an army does. When I fled Beecin I took no gold with me — a fugitive's gold is his gravestone. But I buried it all. Do you know Tal-Çoku, that black hill there before us? On its eastern slope, in the embrace of three rocks, a fathom deep, lies a ton of gold: ingots, harness fittings, my mother's bracelet. Seven years ago I buried it, and over it I swore an oath: "If one day I return to Beecin with an army, I shall dig you out and spend you on that army." Bring mattocks. Either my word comes true, or take my head.

Manas knit his brows — that his guest's word should be put to the test weighed upon him; but on Almambet's face there was neither anger nor haste. It was the face of a man who waits; of a man who had been waiting seven years for this night.

Torches were lit, mattocks seized, and the army marched to the slope of Tal-Çoku. They found the three rocks; they dug where Almambet pointed. They went down a fathom — and a mattock struck something with a dull ring. Leather sacks came out; the sacks were opened; and in the torchlight the gold laughed golden-yellow, just as on the day it was buried. The ingots passed from hand to hand; old Kırgıl weighed an ingot in his palm, weighed it and weighed it, and then bowed before Almambet down to the very ground.

— Your word has come true, he said. From this day forward, your word is my head.

Almambet did not even turn to look at the gold.

— Let it be seasoning to Kanıkey's kül provisions, he said. Distribute it to the army. Only my mother's bracelet — give that to me. I shall carry it to Beecin myself; let my mother know by her bracelet that her son has returned.

✦ ✦ ✦

As the horizon greyed toward dawn, the fire had sunk to embers; the army had withdrawn to its tents, and few remained in the ring: Manas, Bakay, Çubak, and young Sırgak, whose sleep had fled him. Almambet laid one more branch upon the coals.

— Manas, he said. I have also a testament; a man does not ride to war without a testament. Hear me. If I do not return from this road — Beecin is vast, its darkness is deep, I may not return — there shall be no weeping, no drawing out of mourning. My wife is with child; if my son is born, name him Külçoro. Kül — the ash of the hearth; the hearth goes out, the ash remains, and beneath the ash the ember remains. Let him be my ember. Tell him this: his father was born Kıtay and died Muslim; he was caught between two lands, yet he fit within a single heart. Keep my horse for him, give him my sword. And if one day his road leads to Beecin, let him take up a handful of earth as he passes the shore of Lake Averden; in that earth his father's childhood lies buried.

Manas made to protest at the words "if I do not return"; Bakay laid a hand on his knee and silenced him. A testament is not interrupted; a testament is a man's making of peace with his own funeral.

— Your testament is a debt upon our necks, said Manas only. If your son is born he shall be named Külçoro; though this army be reduced to a single man, that name shall be given. But you will return, Almambet. I saw it in my dream: at the gate of Beecin the two of us stood side by side. My dreams do not prove false.

Almambet smiled; and in his smile there was something that chilled Bakay's heart — it was the smile of those who know dreams, and know also what lies beyond dreams. But he said nothing; he looked at the embers and was silent.

— I have one more request, said Almambet. I ride out on reconnaissance; the road must be tried all the way to the gate of Beecin, the outposts counted, the waters tasted. An army will not do for this; a crowded reconnaissance is thievery with drums. I ask for a single companion.

Çubak straightened:

— I am ready. Let it be the atonement of our quarrel; let us take the first arrow together.

Almambet smiled; for the first time that night, he smiled.

— My thanks, brother. But you are the fist of the army, and the fist does not part from the body. I... — and he turned, and looked at the young man kneeling on the far side of the embers, whose eyes shone not with sleeplessness but with eagerness — I ask for Sırgak.

A ripple of astonishment ran through the ring. Sırgak was among the youngest of the çoro; his moustache had barely broken sweat, the hilt of his sword was not yet worn.

— Why him? asked Manas; he asked without anger, out of wonder.

— Because a young eye sees far, said Almambet. Because a young heart does not tire. Because Sırgak, listening to my jomok this night, did not once look at me and see "Kıtay"; he looked at me and saw only "elder brother." On reconnaissance, the man to whom you turn your back is the man by how he looks at you. Rise, Sırgak. Feed your horse, whet your sword. We ride at dawn.

Sırgak sprang to his feet; whether from joy or from fear, his knees were trembling. He did not sleep that night; three times he fed his horse, three times he whetted his sword, three times he looked at the darkness in the east and three times he swallowed. Manas rose, took the two men on either side of him, and turned to the east. The dawn was breaking not from behind the Ala-Too but from the direction they would ride, from over Beecin; yet beneath that torn light the horizon seemed to darken rather than brighten — as if the day were not rising there, but being drawn there and swallowed.

— Do you see that darkness? said Manas. It is the darkness of Beecin; it has swallowed your twenty-one years, swallowed your mother, swallowed your father. Go, and sound it out. But both of you come back to me. The first shot of Akkelte will not be fired without you.

Sırgak bowed before Manas; then he turned to Çubak, and the two men embraced. Çubak said only this into the young man's ear: "His back is entrusted to you; your back to him. I shall look to the east every evening and wait upon the road of you both." Bakay placed in the palm of each traveller a pinch of Talas earth — it is the custom; when the heart tightens in a strange land, it is held to the nose, and the earth reminds a man of his home.

The two riders rode toward the line where the dawn and the darkness ran together; first their shadows grew small, then they themselves. Manas stood a long while on the slope of Tal-Çoku, at the head of the opened pit. The pit was empty now; but it seemed to Manas that the true treasure had not been lifted from it the night before — the true treasure was the two dark shapes now dwindling into the darkness, and he had with his own hand sent his treasure into the mouth of Beecin. He gripped his whip and turned back. The army must be wakened, the road must be pressed on; until word came from the reconnaissance, every day would be as long as a year.

CHAPTER 10

The Reconnaissance of Almambet and Sırgak

— ❖ —

When they reached the border of Beecin, night had settled over the steppe like a wet felt. There was no moon; even the stars seemed sparse, pale, timid, as if they shrank from looking down upon this land. Almambet drew in Sarala's rein and halted; behind him Sırgak checked Kartküröñ's head. Two men, two horses, on the threshold of a vast enemy country, waited, measuring even their breath.

— Beyond this point, said Almambet in a low voice, lies the land where I was born and which you have never seen. Beyond this point every stone is an eye, every bird an ear, every road a trap. Do as I say; halt when I halt. Your word?

— My word, said Sırgak. I am the youngest of the forty çoro, but not the most fearful, Almambet aga. Whatever your road is, that road is mine.

Almambet gazed long into the darkness. His gaze was not a hunter's but a returner's; he knew the scent of these mountains, the murmur of these waters, the weight of these nights from his childhood. He remembered the days when he had learned sixty kinds of learning from Esenkan's masters; some of those arts turned the clouds, some bound the eye, some opened the road. Now all of them would be needed; for the border of Beecin was woven not with the sword but with sorcery, ring upon ring like a chain: outermost the dragon, then the tiger, then the marksmen, then the watcher beasts, then the one-eyed giant, then the army of Kanışay... If you would break the chain, you must begin with its link.

The first link lay at the mouth of the pass. From afar one would have taken it for a black mountain fallen on its side; but each time that black mountain drew breath, the dry grasses on either flank scorched and scattered, and the smell of soot spread through the night. It was the dragon; a dragon that had guarded the Beecin road for a hundred years, whose body blocked the pass from end to end. On its near side, in the shadow of the rocks, prowled a tiger whose eyes burned like coals; and nearer still, nested in the hollows of the stone, the marksmen waited, bows strung, arrows on the string, ready to send death at every shape that stirred.

At the sight of these things Sırgak's hand went of itself to the hilt of his sword. Almambet caught his wrist.

— The sword is of no use here, my boy. Here the tongue speaks before the sword.

He dismounted. He crouched at the foot of the border stone, drew from his breast an old, grease-worn strap of leather, and began to read the writing upon it, stroking the letters with his finger as he read. His voice at first was a whisper; then that whisper became a rumbling as from under the earth, and the rumbling grew and grew until it stretched the fabric of the night like a cloth. As Almambet read, the clouds came down, a wind smelling of snow descended from the peaks of the mountains, and mist swathed the mouth of the pass. The dragon grew restless; it swung its huge head from side to side in the mist, and then that hundred-year-old body rose heavily, dragged itself out of the pass, and flowed away into a dark ravine. The tiger howled once; half the howl stayed in its throat, and it fled into the rocks with its tail between its legs. As for the marksmen — the learning Almambet read cast sleep into their eyes and slackness into their bowstrings; where they crouched their heads sank to their breasts, and their bows slid from their knees.

— Ride, said Almambet, his voice heavy as if soaked in sweat. This link is undone. But ride quickly; the life of a spell is at the mercy of the dawn.

They passed the defile. Passed it they did, but there was no relief in Almambet's face; his eye was on the ground, his ear on the wind, and he kept searching for something. At last, as the half-light began to grey, a shape appeared on the ridge before them: a fox. But no ordinary fox; its neck long, its step measured, stopping every so often to look behind it, carrying something on its back.

— There, said Almambet, Beecin's sentinel that carries news over six months of road. This fox rounds the border at the head of every month, scents what it sees, and carries what it scents to Karagul. If this fox arrives before us, Beecin wakes before us. Sırgak, the arrow is yours, the craft is mine: I shall cut off its road with my art; you take its life with your string.

Almambet took a pinch of dust in his palm and blew; the wind turned, and no scent but its own could reach the fox's nose. The animal was bewildered and turned twice where it stood. On the second turn Sırgak's arrow sang; the fox leapt, twisted once in the air, and fell into the grass together with the burden on its back.

They rode up and looked: beside the fox lay a leather bag bound with a thong. Almambet opened the bag, and the moment he opened it his hand stopped. What came out of the bag was a kaftan worked with gold thread, its shoulders stitched like eagles' wings, an embroidered dragon on its breast — the kaftan of Konurbay. The kaftan of the black-tongued, black-hearted lord of Beecin, the mortal enemy of Manas; a kaftan sent by the sentinel fox as a token to the border lords.

Almambet raised the kaftan aloft in both hands and turned it this way and that in the first light of dawn. Then he laughed softly; in that laugh there was less of joy than of something like the glint of a knife.

— Kanıkey, he said to himself, O vessel of wisdom, Kanıkey... You saw this all the way from Talas.

Sırgak did not understand:

— Saw what, aga?

— Do you know what she put in my saddlebag as we set out? A horse-cloth cut and sewn with her own hand. Its colour, its coat, its mane, the white stockings of its four legs — the very image of Algara. Konurbay's Algara. "A day will come when it is needed," she said; "in enemy country a man's own face is his heaviest burden." And behold: the kaftan is

Konurbay's, the cloth is Algara's. From this day forward I am not Almambet, my boy. From this day forward I am Konurbay, lord of Beecin; and you are the dark slave who walks at my side. Swallow your tongue, bow your head; when I roar, you tremble.

He put on the kaftan; it filled the shoulders as if it had been sewn upon him. They spread Kanıkey's cloth over Sarala; the white-flecked yellow horse darkened under the cloth like a piece torn from the night, and became Algara outright. Almambet settled himself upon the horse; he changed his seat, changed his neck, changed his gaze. Sırgak, for the first time in his life, felt a chill of dread at the man beside him: the one who sat there was Konurbay himself — black of brow, his pride a mountain, his voice a splitter of stone.

The second sentinel appeared before them at mid-morning: a kulca, a wild ram; its horns twisted in spirals, its eyes watchful as a man's. It was the second messenger of the border; the fox carried scent, the kulca carried sight. Seeing them, the kulca did not flee; for what it saw was Konurbay, lord of Beecin, on his Algara, his kaftan on his back. The animal bowed its head and drew near — a sentinel is accustomed to bringing word to its master. Almambet called to it in its own tongue, in that ancient speech which bird and wolf understand, and beckoned it close; the kulca stopped three paces off, its nostrils quivered, it sensed that something was wrong — sensed it, but the matter was already past mending. Sırgak's arrow did not miss this time either. The second link fell.

— The sin be on our necks, said Sırgak; what was the fault of the poor beasts?

— They have no fault, and many sins, said Almambet. Had these two not carried word, even the babe in Beecin's cradle would have seen us in its dreams. Do not weep for the sentinel, my boy; look to the road before you. Now it is the turn of the keçil.

The keçil were the forty monks of the borderland; on forty hills stood forty stone towers, and in forty towers they turned forty prayer wheels, and with each turning they renewed the sorcery of the border. So long as they stood, every link that was undone would be bound anew, every sleeping marksman would wake anew. Almambet — or rather the Konurbay inside the kaftan — rode to the nearest tower, struck its door with his whip, hardened his voice to stone, and roared:

— Did they not tell you Konurbay has come? All forty of you, come down, come to my feet! There is business on the border, there is a secret; this is no hour to dally in towers with prayers!

The keçil who saw the kaftan, who saw Algara, who heard that voice, sent word from one to another; forty shadows came down from forty hills, gathered in the morning mist, and came, heads bowed, hands folded, and ranged themselves at the feet of the man they took for Konurbay. Almambet counted them: forty. Had one been missing, had a single one fled, the work would have been left half done. They were forty; the count was full.

What followed was swift, and here the pen of the novel quickens, for the sword's work does not bear drawing out: Almambet swept his sword from beneath the kaftan, and Sırgak came in from the flank. The forty keçil were cut down far from their prayer wheels, below their stone towers, on a bare hillside. Even as they died they were bewildered; they went watching the undoing of their own spells beneath the sword of the man they took for their own lord. Forty wheels stopped, forty towers fell silent; no tongue remained to renew the sorcery of the border.

Almambet wiped his sword on the grass. His face was dark.

— Do not rejoice, he said to Sırgak, though the boy had said nothing. I do not rejoice either. But the day they call the Çon Kazat does not break in a single day, my boy; first it is leavened with silent bloodlettings such as this. Had these forty lived, tomorrow forty thousand men would have died before Beecin. That is the scale; the heavier pan I will bear myself.

✦ ✦ ✦

Çoñ Malgun they could not bring down until the morning of the sixth day.

He was the thickest link of the border chain: a one-eyed giant; his height a tower, his wrist a mallet, his single eye in the middle of his forehead as big as a millstone. He sat at the mouth of the gorge called Kara-Sengir; from where he sat his legs closed the sixty paces of the gorge, and whatever sought to pass — be it bird, be it wolf — he crushed in his palm. The kaftan did not deceive him; for Çoñ Malgun knew not by the eye but by the scent, and in Almambet's scent was the scent of a man who had drunk kumis for forty years.

— Kirghiz! the giant thundered, before they had even reached the mouth of the gorge. Your kaftan is Konurbay's, your scent is Kirghiz! Come, come; six months I have eaten no man's flesh!

Six days they grappled. For three days Almambet circled the giant: he struck with the sword, and the sword slid off the giant's hide; he thrust with the lance, and the lance snapped on his ribs like a reed. When the giant tired, he would lean against a rock, pretend to close his single eye, and lay his ambush; Almambet would read his learning, choke the gorge with mist, and fill the giant's ears with roaring. Three more days passed thus: the giant could not catch them, nor could they wound the giant. The provisions ran out, the horses grew lean, Sırgak's palms split from the bowstring.

On the sixth night Almambet drew Sırgak close:

— Iron does not bite this giant's hide, but every creature in this world has its gate. His is that single eye. Tomorrow I shall hold him with words; I shall speak with Konurbay's mouth and muddy his wits. A giant whose wits are muddied listens without blinking; and while he listens, the eye ceases to be an eye and becomes a target. You lie on the rock above and hold your lance ready. If your hand trembles, we both stay in this gorge.

— My hand will not tremble, said Sırgak. When we left Talas I swore an oath to my aga Manas: "I will bring Almambet back to you alive," I said. The hand of a man who has an oath does not tremble.

At daybreak Almambet walked into the middle of the gorge, alone, on foot, the kaftan on his back. He planted himself before the giant and spoke with Konurbay's arrogance; he recited news from within Beecin, he named the name of Esenkan, he named the name of the giant's mother — for giants too have mothers, and to hear her name from a stranger's mouth makes children of them. Çoñ Malgun was bewildered; that huge eye, lashless, lidless, opened wide as a divining-stone and fixed itself on Almambet. In that instant, from the rock above, Sırgak's lance came down. The eye as big as a millstone went out in a moment. The giant rose to his feet, clutching his face with both hands; his rising was the rising of a mountain, his scream tore stones from both walls of the gorge. Blind, deafened, he swung his mallet fists this way and that; and as he swung, Almambet circled him, circled and circled — and on the third circling the sword came down on the back of the giant's knee. Çoñ Malgun sank to his knees. A head that has been brought to its knees is finished: Almambet's second stroke parted that huge head from its body.

At the end of the six days, at the mouth of the gorge, the two men looked at each other, gasping. Then Sırgak — he was still a child, after all — laughed:

— Aga, he said, it was I who put out this giant's eye; when the manasçı tell of it, let them speak my name too.

— They will speak it, said Almambet, and for the first time the darkness in his face lifted a little. He laid his hand on Sırgak's shoulder. — They will speak it, my boy. But there is much work yet to be told; before nightfall we must find Kanışay's camp.

Kanışay's camp lay on the inner side of the border, on the shore of a lake: a thousand tents, ten thousand men, and carrying water from the lake to the army day and night, a giant — of Malgun's stock, but smaller than he, and thicker of skull. For two days Almambet watched the camp from afar; he learned by heart the water-giant's road, his hours, the great skins on his shoulder. On the third night, as the giant filled his skins at the lake's edge, Almambet came out of the darkness; before the giant understood what was happening the thing was done — his body went to the lake, his shape to Almambet. Such is the art — Almambet took the giant's very likeness: the shoulders those shoulders, the walk that walk; with the skins on his back he entered the gate of the camp, and no one turned to look. Who looks at a water-carrier?

That night was Çagaan, the year-feast of Beecin. In the midst of the thousand tents fires had been kindled, cauldrons set up, jars of spirits ranged in rows. On the night of the feast Kanışay's men laid down the weapon and took up the bowl. The water-carrying giant moved among the jars that night; at the mouth of each jar he made as if to pour water, and into each jar he dropped a pinch of the dust from the black pouch in his breast. That dust was the blackest learning of Esenkan's masters; Almambet had learned it as a child and never once in his life had used it. That night he used it.

The feast grew hot, the bowls filled and emptied, the songs rose; then the songs broke off one by one. Past midnight, in the camp of a thousand tents, the only one left standing was a giantess who had fled to the lake shore — Kanışay's table-server; she had not touched her lips to the spirits, had understood what she saw, and had thrown herself into the darkness. The news of a six months' road can travel with a single soul. Sırgak was waiting outside the camp with the horses; he saw the fleeing shape, spurred Kartkürööñ, overtook her on the soft ground of the lake shore, and did what had to be done. The giantess fell; the news stayed on the lake shore.

When morning came, the camp was silent. Almambet washed his face at the lake's edge, washed it long; as if together with his face he wished to wash something else as well. Sırgak did not ask. The enchanted chain of the border's guardians, from dragon to keçil, from fox to giant, had been undone link by link; the gate of Beecin stood before them,

unguarded, open. But there was no triumph in Almambet's face; there was the face of a weary debtor, a debtor who has not yet paid the greatest of his debts.

✦ ✦ ✦

From there onward, the road ran through Almambet's childhood.

It was mid-afternoon when they came to Kan-Cayrak; the sun had spread a honey-coloured light over the valley. Almambet halted on Sarala, sat still, dismounted; he gave the halter to Sırgak, walked a few steps, then turned, and his voice had changed:

— Do you see that stream, Sırgak? I caught fish in that stream. Do you see that flat stone? My mother beat wool on that stone. That rapid there they call Taş-Köpürö; when I first crossed that bridge, my head did not reach its railing.

Sırgak was silent. Since the border he had seen sword, blood, sorcery, giants; but what he saw now seemed to him stranger than all of it: the great Almambet, head of the forty çoro, who put dragons to flight and felled giants, had become, at the edge of a stream, a child with a thinning voice.

They walked on. At the mouth of the valley stood a great plane tree; its trunk three fathoms round, its branches pillars to the sky. Almambet came to the foot of the plane, laid his hand on its bark, and rested his brow against his hand.

— My mother bore me at the foot of this plane, he said. Her pangs took her here as they moved to the summer pasture; she bore me in its shade, and here they cut my cord. In Talas they say I was born in the infidel's land — they say it behind my back, I know — well, here is the place where I was born. What is the sin of the earth, Sırgak? Earth is like earth; this plane, had it sprouted in Talas, would have grown just the same.

Then his eye fell to the foot of the plane, and there, among the great roots, he saw a seedling a span high: fresh, two-leaved, a stubborn young plane. Almambet crouched down; he did not touch the seedling, only looked at it. Looked long.

— My mother used to say, he said at last, "if you have seed, the shoot will sprout." As a child I did not understand that saying. The night I fled — the night I left Beecin, the night I left my father's hearth behind me — I came to the foot of this plane. Whether I wept or did not weep, let the manasçı know that. But I buried something here.

He rose, moved to the eastern side of the plane, and paced it out: three paces from the root, two paces from the stone. He knelt, opened the earth with his dagger. Out of the earth came an iron hook wrapped in felt, rust-touched but sound in its body — a shepherd's crook, its tip curved, its haft worn to the hand.

— My father's shepherd's crook, said Almambet, lifting it in both hands. The night I fled I had nothing with me but this. I buried it and said: "If one day I return, if I dig this crook out of this earth with my own hands, I shall know that my word had seed in it." Look, Sırgak. It has come out. The seedling has sprouted, and the crook has kept. He whose word has seed shall see the shoot; my mother did not lie.

He kissed the crook, wrapped it in its felt, and buried it again. At this too Sırgak marvelled:

— Why do you put it back, aga? Take it, carry it to Talas.

— I have carried myself to Talas already, said Almambet. Let the crook stay here. Have something of yours buried in the earth of a place, my boy; otherwise you forget the way of returning to it. Perhaps one day I shall have a son, and... — He did not finish the sentence. He smoothed the earth with his hand, rose, mounted Sarala. — Ride. There remains to us yet an army to send marching, a gate to open, a promise to renew, and a herd to raid.

By sending an army marching he meant this: on the road to the inner citadel of Beecin lay the armies of Ezkara and of Coloy — Coloy, that coarse-breathed, cauldron-bellied strongman; Ezkara, Esenkan's border lord. So long as those two armies stood in their place, there was no reaching the gate and no laying a hand on the herd. This time Almambet neither put on Konurbay's kaftan nor entered the giant's likeness. From the very bottom of his saddlebag he drew a robe wrapped in felt: a khan's robe of state, its back worked with dragons, its collar bossed with gold, its skirt braided halfway with gold thread — but only half. Its right side was khan's work, its left side plain cloth.

— The robe of my father Sooronduk, he said. My father was one of the six lords of Beecin; he could not become a full khan, he became a half khan; and they had his robe sewn half, for such was the custom. There is no man in Beecin who does not know this robe, and to lie to the wearer of this robe is graver than to lie to Esenkan.

He put on the robe; with the arrogance of a half-khanate he rode to Ezkara's headquarters, at midnight, alone, the staff of the half khan in his hand. The sentries, seeing

the robe, fell prostrate. Almambet sent word into Ezkara's tent; shaping his voice to his father's voice — for a son carries his father's voice in his blood — he thundered:

— Word has come from Suuk-Tör! The Kirghiz have crossed Suuk-Tör; they come with forty thousand horsemen! Esenkan's command: let Ezkara take his army, let him send word flying to Coloy, and let the two of them hold the gorge of Suuk-Tör! He who delays loses his head!

The robe of the half khan permitted no delay. Before dawn the two armies, beating drums and sounding horns, set out for Suuk-Tör — the exact opposite of the true road, into the cold of the snow passes. Almambet watched them from a hilltop; tens of thousands of men, on the wind of a single lie, were streaming toward an empty gorge. Sırgak could not contain himself:

— Aga, you have broken this country more with the tongue than with the sword.

— The tongue is older than the sword, said Almambet. And he turned, and fixed his eyes toward the walls of Beecin, toward the inner city whose lights could be made out from afar. His voice changed; for the first time, something trembled in it deeper even than the ache of a childhood home. — Now, he said, one debt remains to me in this city. Not a debt of the sword. A debt of the word.

✦ ✦ ✦

That night Burulça saw in her dream a yellow horse; on the yellow horse a man whose face was in the moon-dark; and on the man's breast an amulet-case she had embroidered with her own hand years before. She awoke; she awoke with her heart hammering at her breast. Burulça was Esenkan's daughter; for ten years, for the sake of a man who had fled Beecin, she had accepted no suit, welcomed no matchmaker, returned no smile for a smile. Under her pillow there always lay the same thing: a ring with half broken away. The other half, the fleeing man had carried off.

That night was the maidens' night of Çagaan; in the inner garden of the city the girls would circle the fire and sing. As soon as morning came, Burulça sent word to the old warrior who commanded the gate watch: "It is the maidens' night; it is not the way, it is not the custom, for men to stand sentry at the garden gate; withdraw the watch, leave the gate to the nurses of my little sister Birmıskal." The old warrior did not gainsay the word of a

khan's daughter; the watch was withdrawn, and the gate was left ajar with a looseness that only girls know.

And in the evening, as the girls circled the fire, in through the shadowed end of the garden slipped a tall figure, wearing no girl's dress but a girl's headdress on its head and a girl's shawl on its shoulders. It passed among the girls; some girls saw it and laughed, some looked away — on the night of Çagaan, eyes are blind and tongues are bound; such is the custom, and lovers know it. Only one girl, Birmıskal, slender, black-eyed Birmıskal, touched the figure's arm and whispered:

— My sister is under the plane tree. For ten years she has stood there every Çagaan. Tonight too she stands there; but tonight, for the first time, she stands with her ring in her hand.

Then she paused, and her eyes gleamed in the dark:

— Is there another man with you? Has Çubak come too?

— Çubak stayed in Talas, said the figure in a soft voice. But he is alive, mightily alive, and he does not let your name fall from his lips even on the day he quarrels.

Birmıskal bowed her head, bit the end of her shawl, said nothing; all that she did not say, the fire in the garden said for her.

Under the plane tree — this garden too had its plane, for every homeland has its plane — stood Burulça. The figure drew near and took off its headdress. Ten years had flowed between two human beings like a river; two banks had gazed at each other for ten years. Now a bridge was laid across the river: two steps hers, two steps his.

— You have come, said Burulça. My dream did not lie.

— I have come, said Almambet. But I have come so that I may not lie, Burulça: tomorrow I go. And when I come again I shall not come alone; behind me will be the forty çoro and forty thousand men, and before me Manas. Upon this city, that day, a black day will dawn. I am the guide of that black day. Know this, and then hold out the ring. If you do not hold it out, I shall count it broken, and it is your right.

Burulça opened her palm; the half ring glinted in the far light of the fire.

— I am Esenkan's daughter, she said, but first I am the daughter of my word. What I said ten years ago stands: wherever your homeland is, there is my homeland. If a black day is to dawn over Beecin, on the night of that day I shall be before your door. Take the half of the ring, bring your own half; let the two be one, and let us be one.

Almambet drew his own half from his breast; the two broken pieces, after ten years, were joined in a woman's palm, and from the place of their joining — so the manasçı tell it — there came a thin sound of aching, like the knitting of a broken bone. They embraced; the song around the fire went on circling as if it had seen nothing. The promise was renewed: they did not speak long, they did not linger; in enemy country even love, like reconnaissance, is best done swiftly.

From the foot of the garden wall came a whistle — Sırgak's whistle; short, twice over, which meant "the time is up, the stars have turned, the watch changes." Almambet leaned his brow against Burulça's brow, stood so for the space of a breath, then turned and, as he had come, passed among the girls, through the shadows, and merged into the night. Burulça remained under the plane tree; in her palm a ring made whole, in her breast a life not yet made whole. But now her waiting had a name; and a waiting that has a name is no longer waiting; it is a road.

✦ ✦ ✦

When they left the city it was the blindest hour of the night. Sırgak asked the way; Almambet, instead of answering, loosed Kartküröñ's halter.

— Beyond this point I too do not know the road by eye, he said. The herds of Çin are on the northern pasture of Beecin; the road to the pasture runs through seven valleys, and six of the seven valleys run through traps. But this horse — this grey-wolf-eyed beast you call Kartküröñ — takes the scent of a herd across seven valleys. Horses too have their learning, my boy; to ours fell the tongue, to theirs the nose. Give him his head, and fall in behind.

They left Kartküröñ's head free; the animal breathed in the air once, moved its ears three times, and then walked with sure steps into the night, toward the starless north. The two men fell in behind. In the first valley the horse went by the water, that no track might remain; in the second valley it went by the slope, that the wind might smother the scent; at the mouth of the third valley it stopped, turned back, and went by the roundabout way — they understood afterward that pit-traps lay in the floor of that valley. At each of the animal's turnings, Sırgak grew a little smaller in his own eyes:

— Aga, he said, this horse is wiser than I.

— Not than you, said Almambet; than the two of us. That is why he is the guide, and we are behind.

Before the dawn greyed they reached the ridge of the seventh valley, and when they looked down from the ridge, the breath of both was stopped. The floor of the valley, as far as the eye could reach, was full of horses. A herd may number a thousand, may number three thousand; this was beyond counting. Dun, bay, grey, white — a living sea rolling from one end to the other in the dark before dawn; the herds of Esenkan, of Konurbay, of all Beecin, the tulpar seed nurtured against the day of war, all together, in one valley.

And at the two ends of the valley, two fires: at one, Karagul — chief herdsman of Beecin, keen of eye, his sleep a hare's sleep; at the other Cañıbay, with his herdsmen about him, long poles in their hands.

Sırgak swallowed:

— Aga, we are two men.

— More than two would have been too many, said Almambet. A herd-raid is not a work of numbers; it is a work of heart. Listen: if this herd takes fright it becomes a flood; and if it becomes a flood, neither Karagul nor Cañıbay can stand before it. What falls to us is to turn the flood toward Talas. I shall go down and read the last of my learning: I shall turn the wind and loose a wolf's cry on the north side of the herd. You come in from that ridge, from the sunrise side; your first arrow into Karagul's fire, your second into Cañıbay's cauldron. To hit is not needful; to startle is needful. The herd will pour south, to the pass, to the road we came by. After that it is horse-driving; and that you know with the milk you sucked from your mother.

He paused for a breath; he turned to Sırgak, and in that moment there was on his face neither Konurbay's kaftan nor the giant's likeness nor the pride of the half khan; there was only his own face, open, plain, the face of a man who has made his decision:

— And know this too, my boy. The moment we lay a hand on this herd, the reconnaissance ends and the kazat begins. This raid is a whip laid across the face of Beecin; the answer to this whip is the whole army of Esenkan. This is the deed from which there is no returning; it was not the dragon, it was not the giant — it is this. If you are afraid, say so; we turn our backs and go, and no one will know.

Sırgak felt his bowstring, then laughed; not with that child's laugh, but with the laugh of a man grown that very night:

— What did my aga Manas use to say to us, aga? "If a man fears the threshold, let hope of the seat of honour be abandoned." I do not fear the threshold. Strike your spark.

Almambet nodded. He went down into the valley; and as the red of dawn set fire to the tips of the ridges, he knelt upon the steppe and read his last learning. The wind turned. From the northern edge of the herd rose a cry that resembled the voice of no wolf, yet froze the blood of every horse. The uncounted herd shuddered like a single body, surged, and that living sea poured roaring to the south, toward the pass, toward Talas. Karagul's fire was scattered by an arrow; Cañıbay's cauldron was overturned; the cries of the two herdsmen were lost like a twig in the thunder of tens of thousands of hooves.

The two men drove their horses after the flood. Behind them Beecin was waking: horn-calls in the distance, signal fires kindling one after another on the hills. Almambet turned and looked back once — once he looked at the homeland of his childhood, at his plane tree, at his buried crook, at Burulça waiting under the plane — then he turned his face to the road. The spark had been struck; from this time forth no palm could smother that spark, and no prayer. Over the steppe the dust of the herd streaming south rose like a pillar to the sky, and out of that dust two riders, like the first tidings of the great war, rode on and on — toward Talas, toward Manas, toward the Çon Kazat.

CHAPTER 11

The Great Campaign: The March on Beecin

— ❖ —

The dust rose from the steppe first as a fine veil; then it swallowed half the sky. Esenkan's numberless herds poured like a flood before Almambet and Sırgak; hooves hammered the earth till the stones struck fire, and the neighing tore the night apart and broke against the walls of Beecin. The two warriors flew like two shadows on the wings of the herd: Almambet lay flat along Sarala's mane, Sırgak had loosed Kartküröñ's rein. The horses too knew what work this was; they pricked their ears like men, and like men they shivered.

The first in Beecin to see that dust was Konurbay. He climbed to the roof of his ordo, fixed his narrowed eyes upon the wilds, and hissed through his teeth:

— The herds are gone. And if the herds are gone, the empire of Kakançın goes after them. Bring me my Algara!

Drums were beaten, horns blared. Konurbay mounted his black stallion Algara; the giant-bodied Ezkara joined him, boar-faced Coloy fell in behind, and last of all came

Karacoy, the archer famed for striking whatever he loosed at, bending his bow as he set out. Behind them the Chinese soldiery, swarming like ants, filled earth and sky and poured onto the trail of the two warriors.

All along the road Coloy grumbled:

— A hundred thousand men for two herdsmen! Had you left it to me, I'd have tucked the pair of them into my sash and carried them home.

— You do not know those two, said Konurbay, never taking his eyes from the dust. If one of them rides Sarala, that is Almambet, turned renegade, my own milk-brother once. Whoever chases the dust that Almambet raises chases his own death. Karacoy, keep your bow ready; no sword comes near such men — only an arrow loosed from afar will find them.

Almambet turned and looked; he saw the blackness covering the horizon, and he smiled. It was the smile of a man looking into the face of death — there was neither fear in it nor regret. Since the day he had been driven from the land of his birth and taken refuge with Manas, he had not known fear for a single day; fear was the portion of those who had a homeland, and his homeland lay between the pommel of his saddle and the hilt of his sword.

— Sırgak, he said, my brother. One debt of ablution remains to us in this world. Let us go down to the water.

They went down to the bank of the Kürpüldök Sarı-Suu. The waters bore out their name; they drummed against the stones and ran foaming and roaring. The two warriors dismounted, laid their weapons in a row upon the grass, rolled up their sleeves. They made their ablutions with the cold water; they washed their faces and were cleansed like men preparing for death. Almambet opened his hands to the sky:

— May Kıdır be our companion. If we die, martyrs; if we live, ghazis. Sırgak, you are the young one, and you are the one I cannot bear to lose. Let us fight by turns: while one fights, let the other draw breath and let his horse rest. Otherwise this multitude will grind us to meal.

— My elder brother, said Sırgak, I came to die not behind you but beside you. But your word is word; the first watch is yours, then mine.

Almambet took the first watch. He wheeled Sarala about and rode alone against the vanguard that came on like a flood. His sword fell once and rose a thousand times; whoever

stood before him was toppled, whatever it touched was cloven in two. Ezkara came at him swinging his mace; Almambet bent low, the mace beat the empty air, Sarala pivoted, and the giant's arm parted from his shoulder. Ezkara drew back bellowing and vanished into the army, binding his wound as he went. Karacoy sent arrow after arrow from afar; the arrows glanced off Almambet's armor and dropped into the water. But the marksman's eye was patient; he was a hunter not of armor but of armor's flaw, and he waited. Then Sırgak entered the field: he plunged in like a young wolf, swift and merciless; Kartküröñ turned beneath him, springing wherever his master's eye fell. And so, one fighting while the other drew breath, two men held an army on the far side of the water for a day and a night.

But the ant feeds on blood; the more the Chinese soldiery was cut down, the more it grew. Coloy roared his war cries, Ezkara swung his mace, and Konurbay drove the army on from behind with his whistling. Almambet saw that his arm had wearied, his sword had dulled, his horse was drenched in sweat. Then he drew from his breast the cay stone left him by his father: the stone that knew the tongue of rain, of snow, of blizzard, that held the very rein of the sky. He plunged it into the water, recited the old words, turned the stone.

It was a summer day; a day for reaping grain and drinking kımız. In an instant the sky split open. A black cloud rose out of the north, the sun went dark, and winter descended on the world. First the rain burst loose, then the rain turned to hail, and the hail became snow. The blizzard howled; along the Kürpüldök Sarı-Suu the end of the world broke loose. The Chinese soldiery, trusting in summer, had dressed thin; the silk kaftans soaked through, clung, and froze. Hands tore loose from bowstrings, fingers could no longer grip a sword. Horses slipped on the icing slopes and went down.

— Now! thundered Almambet. Strike now, Sırgak!

The two warriors came out of the blizzard; to them the snow was a mother's embrace, to the enemy a shroud. They mowed the freezing army down as men mow grain. The Sarı-Suu ran blood; its foam was dyed crimson, and its drumming voice mingled with the sound of groaning. Konurbay saw that sky and earth had become one and his army was falling like leaves; he turned Algara's head and fled to Beecin behind the curtain of the storm. Coloy followed him cursing, Ezkara dragging his mace behind.

When the blizzard stilled, Almambet dismounted, knelt in the snow, and turned his face toward the qibla. Sırgak knelt beside him. Neither said a word. Beside so much death, words were too small.

✦ ✦ ✦

At that hour Manas's army stood in the middle of the red desert they called İt-Ölbös. The desert lived up to its name: no dog endures it, no wolf crosses it, and should a bird fly over, its wings catch fire. For forty days there had been no water; the sand burned like live coals by day and froze like ice by night. They had found a single well on the road, and that one bitter; the horses that drank of it foamed and retched. Lips cracked, tongues stuck to palates; some men sucked their sword-sheaths for coolness, some chewed their saddle-straps. The forty choros swayed in their saddles; old Kırgıl, forgetting his years, carried false hope to the young men: "Beyond that rise is water," he said, and beyond the rise came a new rise. At night the stars hung so low a man might reach up and take one; but stars are no salve for thirst. Manas had not ridden Akkula on this campaign; he sat Aybanboz, the horse Kanıkey had chosen, saying "the road is long, the burden heavy." But İt-Ölbös collects debts written in no ledger: on the morning of the forty-first day Aybanboz sank onto both knees and rose no more. His nostrils filled with sand, his great eyes turned toward his khan, and then went out.

For the first time in his life, Manas stood unhorsed.

When the forty choros saw it, something broke loose inside them. They saw the man like a mountain standing in the middle of the desert at the head of his dead horse; no one could offer him a mount, for what horse could carry Manas? The khan stroked Aybanboz's mane once with his dust-caked hand, then straightened. His voice was cracked, but it was not low:

— My warriors, hear me. I used to think a man is born on horseback and dies on horseback; God has shown me how to walk on foot as well, that I might not grow proud. If I fall in this desert, do not bury my bones in the sand — carry them to Talas. Tell Kanıkey that Manas paid his debt. Semetey is still in the cradle; tell him his father did not flee, he was left upon the road. Hold Bakay as your elder, hold Almambet as your own blood. And let none of you, ever, turn your back before an enemy.

— You will not die! cried Acıbay; but his voice fell thin in the desert, and the sand swallowed it too.

Old Kırgıl dismounted and laid his rein before the khan: — My years are full, my road is done; my horse is yours, my Khan. Manas gripped the old man's shoulder and gave back

the rein: — Your horse is your life, Kırgıl ata. Manas is not a man to ride away on the life of his choro. I will walk; the road loves the one who walks it. And he walked; the forty choros dismounted and walked on foot behind their khan. That day the desert beheld an army that spared its horses and did not spare its own lives.

In that narrow hour, two dark shapes appeared on the horizon: Almambet and Sırgak had come, driving the vanguard of the herds before them. The joy of reunion was brief; Sırgak slid from his saddle like a falling leaf and dropped to the sand. His face had gone yellow, his lips blue; one of Karacoy's arrows had found the edge of his armor, and the poison on its tip had worked its way to the marrow over forty days. Bakay ran to him, laid his ear to the young man's chest, lifted an eyelid, shook his head:

— Poison, he said. Black poison. But God, who gives the affliction, has also created the cure.

The old man drew two pouches from his saddlebag. On the mouth of one was written "Sebep" — the Means; on the other, "Medet" — the Succor. He crushed the Sebep herb, kneaded it with water, and trickled it between Sırgak's teeth; he pressed the Medet salve to the mouth of the wound, read prayers over it, and for three days and three nights did not leave his side. At the end of the third night Sırgak opened his eyes, and his first words were these:

— Is my brother Almambet on watch? Has my turn passed?

Bakay laughed; he laughed as if he had not laughed in years, his beard trembling. But inside he was not laughing; he saw the state of the army. No water, the horses spent, the hearts scattered; some choros had begun to whisper, "let us turn back." That night Bakay sat alone in his tent, thought long, then called for pen and paper. He wrote a letter; in the morning he had it read to the army, saying, "Our spy has flown it out of Beecin." The letter said this: Esenkan had heard that the Kirghiz were perishing in the desert; "I will feed their corpses to my dogs," he had said, "the rest I will make slaves, and their women in Talas I will parcel out among my soldiery." Through the army there passed first a murmur, then a fire. The tongues that had said "let us turn back" now swore "let us bring Beecin down upon his head." Bakay watched from under his beard; so there was such a thing as a lawful lie — the kind that raises an army's dead heart back to life.

In those same days the caravan sent out behind them arrived at last: Akkula and the Akolpok, which Kanıkey had seen in her dream and entrusted with the words, "deliver them when the day comes." The white tulpar knew his master by scent in the middle of the

desert; he neighed and reared, tore his halter loose and ran to Manas. Manas threw his arms around Akkula's neck; the forty choros saw their khan's eyes fill that day for the first time, and pretended not to see. When he drew over his shoulders the Akolpok, the war-coat Kanıkey had woven and proved through forty days of water and forty days of fire, Manas was the old Manas again; even the desert understood it, and that night a cool wind blew.

✦ ✦ ✦

When they reached the foot of Tal-Çoku, dust rose from the four quarters of the horizon: the armies of the twelve khans had come at the appointed day. Kökçö came with his banner, Koşoy came with his white beard, Bokmurun son of Kökötöy came with the ruddy cheeks of his youth. Drum answered drum, war cries filled the steppe: "Manas! Manas!"

Nor had Beecin been idle. Esenkan brought his army out from behind the walls; he set Konurbay on the right wing and Coloy on the left; the giant Madıkan he sent to the vanguard, Ilama and Mañkuş behind him, and foremost of all the wrestler Kutan. Like two seas the two armies stood face to face before Tal-Çoku; the grey plain between them lay spread like fate's own table.

First the champions came out in single combat; such was the custom — the fate of two armies rode first upon the shoulders of lone horsemen. Madıkan entered the field; tall as a minaret, his voice like thunder; the horse beneath him no horse but a piece of a mountain. Against him rode Çubak, bearing Koşoy's blessing. Three times they circled, and three times the lances shattered on the shields; on the fourth pass Çubak caught the giant by the flank, wrenched him from the saddle, and dashed him to the earth. The ground groaned; Madıkan did not rise again. A murmur ran through the Chinese ranks; the Kirghiz ranks thundered "Manas!"

Coloy entered the field foaming with rage; facing him this time was Sırgak — Sırgak, but yesterday returned from the poison's edge. Coloy laughed: "Your mouth still smells of milk! Go home, and send your mother!" Sırgak did not answer; he left the word to his sword. He drove Kartküröñ like a lightning-bolt, and the nimble overcame the gross: Coloy's mace swung into empty air, Sırgak's sword did not go astray. The boar-faced wrestler, Coloy who had come alive out of so many fields of so many wars, was stretched

upon the earth by the hand of the man he had called a child. Ilama fell, Mañkuş was toppled; the wrestler Kutan came out to grapple and had his back broken across Koşoy's knee — the old tiger lived once more his days at Kökötöy's memorial feast. When the champions had fallen one by one, Esenkan loosed his whole army; then the two seas closed upon each other, the world turned to dust, and the dust turned to blood. Before the day reached noon the sky could no longer be seen; clouds of arrows covered the sun, and the neighing of horses could not be told from the war cries of men.

In the midst of that slaughter Manas, on Akkula, was a lightning-bolt streaming from crest to crest; wherever he struck, a breach opened, and into the breach the forty choros poured, tearing the enemy line apart from within. Almambet knew the tongue of the Chinese soldiery; in the darkness he shouted their own battle cry and set their ranks to slaughtering one another. Çubak took up another work: he had not forgotten the khan's word, "bring me Esenkan's lords alive." He wound his lasso about his arm and plunged into the bosom of the enemy host; when evening came there were forty Chinese lords behind him, strung together on one rope — their kaftans dust, their faces ash, their necks in the noose.

Three days the slaughter lasted. On the evening of the third day the gates of Beecin opened; and out of them came not an army but envoys. At their head, bareheaded, his sash hung about his neck, walked Esenkan. He fell to the earth before Manas:

— Mercy, he said. I have come to beg for mercy. My empire is yours, my throne is yours. My daughter Burulça, and Birmıskal, and the fairest of a thousand maidens, my elephants, my golden throne — I lay them all before you. Only stay the blood; it is enough.

Manas looked long at this old man from his horse's back. Then:

— No sword is raised against one who begs mercy, he said. Stand up. But know this: if ever again I suffer wrong in Kakançın, these gates will not close against me a second time.

They entered Beecin. The city was a world the Kirghiz had never seen: wall within wall, lacquered pavilions, pillars carved with dragons, streets drowned in silk. Horses born on the steppe walked skittish over the paved roads; choros in felt boots, finding marble instead of earth beneath their feet, looked at one another. Esenkan gave what he had promised: Burulça, robed in silks, her eyes wet but her head high, was brought before the khan; Birmıskal came after her; a thousand maidens and a thousand camel-loads of yambı were carried to the palace in a train that began at mid-morning and had not ended by dusk. The elephants were brought — beasts with mountain bodies, whose name the Kirghiz had

heard but whose like they had never seen; even the bravest of the forty choros stepped back a pace at first, and then they laughed at themselves.

In Esenkan's palace they spread a carpet before Manas: the golden carpet said not to fade in forty years, woven of gold thread and daylight. Manas was seated upon that carpet; before the twelve khans, the forty choros, and the thousand lords of China, he was raised khan over Kakançın's Beecin. To seat a man on white felt and lift him up was the custom of the steppe; here there was gold instead of felt, but Bakay left no rite unfulfilled, and read the ancient blessing over the khan's head. Drums were beaten, cymbals rang; the warrior of Talas, son of orphaned Cakıp who had been born in exile in the Altay, sat on the throne of the greatest city in the world. Koşoy stroked his white beard and laughed: "When Cakıp herded sheep in the Altay, who would have said his son would be khan in Beecin?" When Acıbay was offered Chinese wine in place of kımız, he turned the cup away: "What we drink is the milk of the mare," he said, "and that we will drink in Talas."

That night Bakay left the din of the feast and climbed the walls; he looked at the stars, looked long, and his brows drew together. To Almambet, who came to his side, he said in a low voice:

— Victory too has its shadow, my son. And the shadow lengthens as the light grows. What is written in the dañza, you know better than I.

Almambet did not answer. He knew: in Beecin's ancient dañza it was written, "Manas will come, and for six months he will be khan." Six months. What came after, the dañza did not say; and in what it did not say there was hope, and there was the abyss. The elders of the city knew that writing too; in the bazaars, in the temple courtyards, they counted the days of the six months, some with dread, some with a hidden joy. Every evening the count grew one less.

✦ ✦ ✦

Months passed. Manas's khanate spread across Kakançın; but the hands that bore the khanate's burden and gathered its taxes were not Kirghiz hands alone — old lords and new-fledged plunderers pressed in between. The debt of the grain the war had burned was loaded onto the backs of the living. A heavy pestilence settled on China's shoulders; in some villages no man was left to yoke an ox, in some houses the hearth ceased to smoke. In

the bazaars people began to whisper to one another: "This six months' reckoning has cost us sixty years." The whisper grew, and hatred fermented; and the hatred turned not upon the tax-farmer but upon the khan. Manas heard none of it; and those who heard did not carry it to the khan, for the drunkenness of victory makes the ear deaf. Only Bakay heard something of it from Acıbay, who went down into the bazaar in disguise, and at each hearing tugged at his beard: "Squeeze a stone and water will come," he said, "but squeeze a people and blood comes. And one day that blood will stain someone's hand."

In the palace kitchen there was a cook named Şuykuçu; a smiling man, honey-tongued, who stood to prayer saying "I too have become a Muslim." It was he who kept Manas's table, he who knew what the khan ate, when he slept, and by which door he went out to the dawn prayer. At night, when all slept, in the sooty corner of the kitchen he wrote fine script on fine papers; and what he wrote he flew out of the city in the pannier of the carter who brought the vegetables. The place his letters went was Konurbay's camp. Konurbay had been beaten, but he had not died; in the mountain ordo to which he had fled, at the knee of his mother Karıkan, he lay coiled like a snake, waiting.

Karıkan's hatred ran darker even than her son's. For six months she gathered the master smiths of Beecin into the mountains; for six months the fire never died, the anvil never fell silent. The thing they forged was a moon-axe: moon-faced, black-hafted, its edge whisper-thin. When it was finished Karıkan carried it with her own hands, dipped it three times into the venom of the dragon kept fattening in a black well, and drew it out three times; and each time the blade's edge hissed once and darkened.

— This axe, said Karıkan, will cut what no sword can cut. But it is not to be swung blindly; you must know your opening.

The opening was written in Şuykuçu's letter. Konurbay read the letter three times by the light of the oil lamp, and at the third reading he laughed: "Every day before dawn the khan climbs the minaret. He climbs alone. He climbs unarmed. His feet bare, his head uncovered, his eyes on the sky; he gives the call to prayer. At that hour there is no one beside him but God."

— I will not come between him and his God, said Konurbay; let no one come between me and the nape of his neck, and it is enough.

At that time a rider came down into Talas: Şuutu, the bearer of glad tidings. He expected a feast of forty days and forty nights for his news — Beecin taken, Manas on the

throne — but he saw Kanıkey's face turn white as paper. Kanıkey gave the herald's due, gave it in full, but two tears fell from her eyes:

— Şuutu, she said, I will give you forty mares, ask of me what you will; only tell me the truth. Has my khan seated himself on the throne, or has he been bound to it? I saw Beecin in my dream: from under the golden carpet black water was seeping. Whoever remains in Beecin dies, Şuutu. Go now, and tell my khan Kanıkey says "return quickly." Tell him the grey yurt of Talas is wider than the golden palace of Kakançın. Tell him Semetey has learned to say "father" — let the owner of that word come home.

As Şuutu turned his horse's head he looked once more at Kanıkey: the lady stood on the threshold of the grey yurt with Semetey in her arms; the child, taking his mother's tears for a plaything, was trying to catch them in his fist. Şuutu rode back, and the roads were long; a word travels slower than its owner. Before the word reached Beecin, the dawn had broken one more time.

That morning Manas woke early. In his dream he had seen Akkula's mane shorn, the Akolpok slipping from his shoulder and falling, and the waters of Talas running backward; he did not read it for good, but neither did he speak of it to anyone. The reader of his dreams was Kanıkey; and Kanıkey was far away. He made his ablutions and left his sword inside the door, as he did every morning — one does not go into God's presence girded with iron. Barefoot, bareheaded, he climbed the stone steps of the minaret. Beecin slept beneath his feet; the roofs swam in mist, and in the east the first redness trembled like the face of water. Manas raised his hands to his ears; and his voice, rising out of that mountainous chest, spread over the city.

In the shadow of the call to prayer, another shadow rose out of the darkness of the stair. Konurbay had waited six months for this day; the moon-axe hidden beneath his kaftan, his hatred hidden behind his teeth, he climbed the steps like a cat. Manas's back was turned; his eyes were on the sky, his tongue on the takbir. The poisoned moon flashed once in the first light of morning and came down upon the nape of the khan's neck.

Manas staggered and gripped the parapet of the minaret; when he turned to look, Konurbay was already pouring down the steps, leaping onto Algara, held ready below. Manas's knees gave way, he sank onto the stone; but he did not fall. He recited the remaining half of the call, to its end, while the blood ran from his neck into his kaftan. The city did not hear that voice crack; only the doves at the foot of the minaret took wing.

As Konurbay galloped away, he shouted with all the voice in him:

— I have killed Manas! Kakançın, hear me: I have killed Manas!

✦ ✦ ✦

That cry was a live coal dropped into dry grass. The hatred of six months took flame in a day: the shops closed, archers climbed to the rooftops, the armies in the mountains marched on the city. Those who yesterday had prostrated themselves in the streets where the khan passed now whetted stones; the hands that yesterday had paid the tax in silence now gripped spears. The oath Esenkan had sworn was drowned in the well Karıkan had dug; all China rose to its feet at the word "the khan is dead." As for Şuykuçu, that morning he had vanished from the kitchen; before the ash of his hearth had cooled, nothing was found in his sooty corner but a pinch of burnt paper. Acıbay crumbled the paper's ash in his palm and held it out to Bakay; the old man smelled it, and his face went dark: — We have been struck by the pen of one who ate our bread, he said. It is easy to guard against the sword; it is hard to guard against the man at your own table.

But the khan had not died. The collar of the Akolpok had broken the axe's force; the poison had touched the blood but could not reach the life. Bakay pressed what remained of Sebep and Medet to the mouth of the wound, the forty choros stood watch at forty doors; and after three days Manas rose to his feet. His first act was to call for his sword, his second for his horse. Bakay barred his way:

— My Khan, he said, the wound is fresh and the enemy is a sea. Let us withdraw to Talas; the mountains will be at our backs, the waters before us. This city is too narrow for us.

— Bakay, my elder, said Manas, you are my mind, I know it. But if I go out of that gate wounded, what will the manasçıs say tomorrow? They will say "Manas fled from Beecin." I do not fear death; I fear the word. I will not let them say he fled.

He rode out before the army; the bandage on his neck hidden beneath his kaftan, his face yellow, his eyes fire as of old. From the army that saw him standing there rose first a silence, then a roar that shook mountains from their roots; the living return of the khan they had called dead put forty thousand new lives into forty thousand men. They passed out the white wheat flour Kanıkey had sent all the way from Talas, handful by handful; each man cast a pinch of the flour into his mouth, chewed it, and swore his oath: "I have

tasted of this flour; if I flee, may this flour be forbidden me, may my mother's milk be forbidden me, may my homeland be forbidden me." The white flour became an oath against the black day. Old and young, khan and servant chewed the same flour; even Bakay, saying "the word of wisdom is one thing, the word of the oath another," cast his handful into his mouth. The forty choros cried out with one voice, the armies of the twelve khans thundered; the gates of Beecin were flung open once more, and the Kirghiz marched against a host a hundred times their number.

That day's battle was like none before it. In the others there had been the scent of victory in the air; in this one, only the scent of blood. This time China fought to the death; for its own soil, its own hatred, its own revenge. The champion Kalday came into the field, his body like a fortress tower; Manas felled him in a single turn of Akkula. Tiken came out, his lance a pine trunk; Almambet's sword found him too. But from the place of every fallen champion two regiments rose; behind every rank cut down a new rank sprang up, like grass, like black grass. The choros said to one another: "The more these die, the more they multiply; the more we multiply, the more we die."

Toward late afternoon, in the thickest of the battle, a cry went up: Bokmurun! Kökötöy's only son, Bokmurun of the feast that legends told of, slid from his saddle with an arrow in his breast. That young lord who only yesterday, it seemed, had hosted all the khans of the world at his father's memorial feast, who had grown to manhood on the counsels of Maani-Berdi, now lay in the dust of Beecin. Sırgak reached him and took him up behind his saddle, but the young lord's head had already fallen to one side; there was half a word on his lips, and no one heard it. With that arrow, Kökötöy's hearth went out. When Koşoy heard it, two tears ran down into his white beard; the old man said, "Son whose feast-bread I ate — who now will give your feast?" — and could say nothing more. When Manas heard it he drove Akkula toward the place of the cry and mowed down all before him; but the more he mowed, the more the enemy closed like a sea behind him. Bakay reached his side and seized his rein:

— My Khan! Valor is not to die; valor is to keep the valiant alive. The army is melting. Give the order to withdraw; give it, that we may have hands left to fight tomorrow.

Manas looked once more through the smoke of battle at Beecin: at the city of the throne where he had sat six months, the city whose minaret kept his blood. Then through his teeth, as if speaking to his own heart:

— Sound the horns, he said. We withdraw. But let Konurbay know: this account is not closed.

The horns wailed bitterly. The army tore itself from the enemy fighting; the wounded were taken up behind riders, the standards were furled. They bound Bokmurun's body onto a camel; they entrusted Kökötöy's son not to foreign soil but to the road he had come by — to leave not even their dead to the enemy was the steppe's last debt. The Chinese soldiery came after them like a wolf pack that has taken the scent of blood; a rain of arrows beat on the necks of the retreating ranks. Konurbay rode foremost; standing tall on Algara, he shouted with all his voice: — Do not let them go! Finish it before they reach the steppe! The wounded wolf heals if it reaches its den!

Then Almambet turned Sarala's head back. Alone, he placed himself between the rear of the army and the front of the enemy. He drew the cay stone from his breast; the stone burned cold in its master's palm. Almambet closed his eyes and recited the old words his mother had taught him; as he recited, the sky came down lower, and lowering, darkened. Cloud heaped like a mountain over the plain; day became night, and eye could not see eye. The Chinese archers shot their arrows into the darkness, and the darkness swallowed the arrows. Behind that black curtain the Kirghiz army streamed away toward the mountains and was lost to sight.

Manas halted on the first slopes of the mountains and looked back. On the plain beneath the black cloud, only the heart's eye could make out a single horseman fighting and falling back, falling back and fighting again; and the khan's heart's eye was open. — Almambet, he said to himself, you have made your own homeland a shield for us. Manas will pay this debt before he dies. Bakay was silent at his side; both knew that to pay one must first live, and that life was no longer promised to anyone.

Almambet remained hindmost, alone. In the darkness he heard two things: Sarala's breathing, and his own heart. Behind him, in the place he knew without seeing, a hundred thousand enemies were breathing; before him, where the darkness ended, his brothers were drawing away into the mountains. The heart that had asked for so long — shall I call Beecin "my own homeland" or "the enemy's den"? — stopped asking that night; now it knew one thing only: the darkness behind him belonged to the enemy, the darkness ahead to his brothers. And between the two, a man gripping a cay stone in his fist would stand watch alone until the dawn.

The sky did not clear that night. Behind the cloud the moon walked, the stars walked, death walked; and far away, very far away, in the grey yurt of Talas, a woman drew the swaddling cloth once more over her sleeping son and looked toward the door. The door did not open.

CHAPTER 12

Kococaş, the Martyrdom of the Warriors, and the Death of Manas

— ❖ —

Morning broke over the İt-Ölbös desert with the smell of blood. The sand-wind that had blown all night had stilled, and a thin shroud of dust had been drawn over the dead; as if the desert wished to cover with its own hand the work it was ashamed of. Among broken lances, toppled helmets, and frozen hands still gripping their bows, horses wandered masterless, searching for the scent of their riders. Far off, at the foot of the horizon, the walls of Beecin rose through the morning haze like a mountain range; not stone but a heap of fate, a dark mass that grew as one drew near and grew colder as it grew.

And behind the rocks there was a shadow that neither Manas's eagle eye had made out nor Almambet's insight, which read every wind. Kococaş the marksman, raised in Esenkan's palace, who in darkness could strike the thread through a needle's eye, lay among those shadows like a stone. One day he would put on a garment the color of rock and become one with the rock; one day he would wear the guise of sand and be one with the sand; one day, in the shade of a withered bush, he would turn to a leaf. His bow worked

apart from his body, his eye apart from his heart. Kococaş did not meet a warrior as warriors meet; his prey was those briefest of openings — the instant a horse stumbled, a helmet slipped a finger's breadth, a tired hand let the shield sink for a single breath. In those days of slaughter, death itself had taken this man's shape, and it was watching for an opening.

The first to be struck was Kökçö. Kökçö son of Aydarhan, wheeling right and left on his grey horse to rally his scattering choros, felt his mount stumble on a corpse; his chest lay open for the space of one breath. That breath sufficed. The arrow that came from behind the rock came without even a whistle, and entered by the narrow gate between collarbone and heart. Kökçö straightened once in the saddle, looked with astonished eyes at the distant walls, then toppled sideways like a heavy plane tree. Before he touched the ground, the second arrow was in the air: Muzburçak, seeing his companion fall, had reined in hard and halted — for a moment, only a moment. A man standing still was, in Kococaş's eye, no different from a standing stone. The arrow found him at the temple, where his helmet had slipped. Two khans, two old friends, fell face to face upon the same sand; as if, at the end of the long campaign, they would at last speak together alone.

— There is something in the rocks! shouted Sırgak, his voice tearing the desert. That is no rock, no rock's shadow; the arrows come from there — it watches for an opening!

Young Sırgak, tenderest of the choros and the most fearless; before his mustache had darkened he had ridden at Akkula's side, had gone with Almambet as a spy into Beecin, and on his return his name was spoken among warriors. He drove his horse toward the rocks; he had raised his shield before his face, but when a horse runs at full rein the shield sways, and the face is bared and covered, bared and covered. Kococaş counted that baring and covering with a hunter's patience; one, two, three... At the shield's third dip he loosed the string. The arrow struck Sırgak in the very center of his brows. The young warrior fell backward, arms flung wide to either side, as if he wished to embrace all the wind of the steppe one last time. His horse ran on with its empty saddle as far as the rocks, and there stopped and neighed; the neigh wandered long through the desert and found no answer.

The tidings of death came to Manas one by one, like birds with broken wings. They said Kökçö — he was silent. They said Muzburçak — he clenched the rein in his fist. They said Sırgak; and then, on Akkula's back, he closed his eyes for a moment, and in the darkness of his eye he saw that boy's face which had grown up beside him since the Altay: Sırgak whose hands trembled at his first hunt, who on his first campaign listened at night

by the fire to Bakay's tales, who was still half a boy when he went with Almambet as a spy into Beecin. When he opened his eyes the color of the desert had changed; the sand was sand no longer, but the color of ash.

That day Manas fought in forty places from Akkula's back; when he held one end of the slaughter, the other end came loose. The multitude was like a sea; the numberless soldiery that Esenkan and Konurbay had gathered multiplied as it died and was renewed as it was cut down. The forty choros fought in forty places, each like a battalion, but the cord between them was parting strand by strand. And at the end of every parted strand was that unseen eye behind the rocks.

Çubak's horse was shot in the noon heat. Çubak of Akbalta's line, Manas's right hand, was left on foot; they say a warrior unhorsed in the desert has one day to live — Çubak endured nine. Nine days and nine nights, with one sword and one shield, he fought, now setting his back to a hollow in the rocks, now taking cover behind dead horses. His lips split with thirst, his tongue stuck to his palate; he licked the night's dew from the inside of his shield and so reached morning. At night, in the rock hollow, he would look at the stars and murmur to himself; some of it was heard, some went into the wind. They say he spoke of Talas in his fever; and of the steam of his mother's cooking-pot. On the third night the enemy sent him bread and water — even warriors could not withstand such valor — and Çubak took the bread, drank the water, looked the envoy in the eye and laughed: — I pay my debts with the sword, he said; be before me again at morning. The champions who came against him he toppled one by one; with each that fell his name grew in the enemy host, and as his name grew, fewer came against him, and they took to raining arrows from afar. On the evening of the ninth day, as the sun went down as if dipped in blood, Çubak rose one last time. Gripping his sword in both hands, he was walking toward Beecin — alone, on foot.

— Manas! he called with his cracked lips, come if you come; and if you come not, my blessing is yours, I forgive you my right!

His voice reached no one; the desert swallowed voices too. Kococaş's arrow found him in mid-stride, at the instant his knee bent for a single breath. Çubak sank to his knees, drove his sword into the sand and leaned upon it, and so he remained, kneeling, propped upon his sword. Those who found him at morning thought from afar that he was fighting still; when they drew near they saw that the warrior had long since gone, and the body was refusing to follow.

Almambet's martyrdom was written another way. Almambet, raised in Esenkan's own palace, who had left his father's faith and come to Manas, who had found in the man whose bread he broke a brother beyond brothers; Almambet, who knew Beecin's roads, its waters, its passes better than any man. When he heard that Çubak had fallen, black water rose to his eyes. He turned Sarala's head, asked counsel of no one, waited for no one; alone, at full rein, he rode against the iron gate of Beecin. He cut down all that stood in his way; his lance broke, he drew his sword; his sword dulled, he took up his moon-axe. When he reached the gate, whether there were sixty wounds upon him or seventy, no one counted; his armor hung in ribbons, his face was awash in blood, but his back was straight. Three times he struck the iron gate with his moon-axe; three times the gate groaned like a mountain, and did not open.

— O Beecin! thundered Almambet. I was raised on your bread, I spoke with your tongue; but you were no mother to me — you remained a stepmother! Open, and let us settle our account!

The gate did not open; from the tops of the walls arrows rained. Almambet, on Sarala's back, shuddered as the arrows sank into his body, shuddered, and did not fall. At the last, when the final arrow Kococaş sent from behind the wall entered where the armor did not guard his neck, Almambet lifted his head once toward the sky — whether he saw the snowy summits of the Altay or the willows of Talas, who can say — and sank upon Sarala's mane. The horse, feeling his master's weight upon his back, turned to stone; he neither fled nor neighed; before the gate, under the rain of arrows, he stood like a rock.

When word came that Almambet had fallen, Manas dismounted in the middle of İt-Ölbös. No one could approach him. The khan knelt upon the sand, took off his helmet and set it before him, and remained so for a long time. Almambet had been more to him than a choro; born of different mothers, they had been born of one heart. When they swore their oath, their opened blood had run into one bowl and mingled in one kımız. Now half of that blood had dried before the iron gate of Beecin, and Manas felt how suddenly heavy the remaining half had grown within his body.

In that slaughter twelve of the forty choros fell as martyrs. Kökçö went, Muzburçak went; Sırgak, Çubak, Almambet went; and seven more warriors whose names were told at hearthsides mingled with the sand of İt-Ölbös. That day the woman warrior Saykal swung her sword, lest it be said no one was left who fought like Saykal; Koyonaalı, with his wounded shoulder, dragged the bodies of two choros out from under the arrows. But

when evening came and the living were counted, no one could look into the faces of those who sat about the fire. The forty warriors had been like forty sons of one mother; and who can look into the face of a mother who has laid twelve sons in the earth at once?

✦ ✦ ✦

The moment Akkula was struck was the moment something tore loose within Manas. The tulpar had carried his master out of the thickest of the slaughter and was climbing a low rise, breathing hard, when Kococaş's arrow found the horse's spine at its very center. Akkula screamed once, like a human being, in pain; his hind legs dissolved like writing written on water. Manas leapt to the ground and took his horse's head in his arms. Akkula, foaled on the night his master was born, named by Bakay, who in forty campaigns had carried him into death and out of death; not dark bay but dun; not a horse but a wing. In the beast's great eye the sky and the face of Manas stood side by side; the eye filled, and the tear came down the dusty cheek, leaving its trail.

— My Akkula, said Manas, and his voice trembled that day for the first time. I did not choose you from the herds of the Ala-Too; you chose me. Who will carry me now, who will overtake the fleeing, who will turn back from the place of no returning?

The horse, as if in answer, rubbed his head once against his master's knee, and the sky in his eyes went dark. Manas rose. The man who rose was not the man who a moment before had wept over his horse. His face had turned to the granite of the Ala-Too when it darkens in winter. He felt along the collar of the Akolpok; there, where it had been sewn for forty years, lay the steel bullet the grey dervish had left in mother Çıyırdı's palm on the night of his birth, saying, "The day will come when it is needed; sew it into his collar." He tore open the collar Kanıkey's hands had mended and took the bullet into his palm; the bullet was warm, as if with the heat of forty years. He braced Akkelte on his knee — the fire-mouthed, grey-smoked veteran gun whose voice was thunder — and drove the steel bullet into the barrel.

Then he waited. He knew he would not find Kococaş with the eye; had he been a man to be found with the eye, he would have been found long since. Manas closed his eyes and listened to that old voice within him, the whisper of the çiltens, the voice left from the night Kıdır gave him his hand. The desert fell silent. The wind stopped. And within that

silence he heard, far away, behind the rocks, the thin, thin moan a bowstring makes as it is drawn, which only the heart can hear. He raised Akkelte to his shoulder, turned it with his eyes still closed, and in the instant he opened them, he fired.

The sky thundered once. The steel bullet parted Kococaş's head from his body behind the rock; nor did it stop at parting, but passed on through the champions ranked behind him; with that single shot, the heads of eight champions fell to the sand along with Kococaş. A moan spread through the enemy host; their marksman who struck the needle's eye in darkness had been struck unseen in the light of day. That day not one more arrow was loosed from the walls of Beecin into İt-Ölbös.

Manas had his martyrs gathered one by one. Almambet was brought from before the iron gate by Saykal and Acıbay; Sarala would not leave the body, bared his teeth at whoever took his halter, and walked only when Almambet's body was laid across his own back. They found Çubak leaning on his sword and parted him from it by force; those who saw that the dead hand would not release the hilt shuddered. On Sırgak's face, despite that crimson seal between his brows, a boyish smile remained.

The next morning Manas, with his surviving choros, stood before the iron gate of Beecin. His vengeance was great, his arm heavy; he had sworn to break the gate and bring the city down upon its own head. In the instant he turned Akkelte upon the gate, the sky darkened, and out of the cloudless sky came a voice; a voice neither man's nor woman's, coming neither from near nor from far; it came from everywhere, and from within:

— Against Beecin, where the Flood's waters never entered, your strength will not suffice. Turn back, Manas. Return to your homeland, and die there.

Manas hauled on the rein and did not listen; he drove one step nearer the gate. The voice came a second time, and this time the mountains echoed it:

— Against Beecin, where the Flood's waters never entered, your strength will not suffice. Return to your homeland, and die there.

Manas's jaw locked; he had sworn an oath — was he a man to turn from his oath? At the third step the voice came a third time, and this time no mountain was left that did not echo, no heart that did not tremble:

— Return to your homeland, Manas. Die there.

Akkelte grew heavy on Manas's shoulder, and his arm came down. The man who in forty years of life had turned back before no servant, no khan, no army, could not stand

against what came from heaven. He bowed his head; from beneath his helmet two tears fell onto his horse's mane. He turned to the survivors; his face was not the face of a beaten man, but the face of a man reconciled to his own death, which is heavier.

— We turn back, he said. Load the martyrs. Talas awaits us.

Bakay rode to his side; white-bearded, white-hearted Bakay, the vein of wisdom through forty years. He offered no comfort, asked no question; he only laid his hand on the khan's knee.

— No servant of God can stand against the word that comes from heaven, Manas, he said. Not to stand against it is not to be defeated. A gate that Noah's waters never entered requires Noah's patience; let that patience be the portion of those who come after you. Our work now is to bring the martyrs to the soil of the motherland; let a warrior sleep not where he fell, but where he was born.

Manas did not answer; he assented only with his head. But Bakay saw something in that bowing of the head, and what he saw he told no one: the khan, in giving the order to return, had also received his own order of death, and he knew it.

✦ ✦ ✦

The road home was longer than the road out; the road was the same road, the heart was another. When they reached the forest of Kök-Buluñ they halted; the martyrs' bodies were on the carts, the wounded in the saddles, the living were silent. Toward morning, as the east grew pale, Manas made his ablutions, spread his felt cloak toward the qibla, and stood to prayer. The ghazi of forty years forgot the world when he bowed to the earth; he forgot Beecin too, and his wound, and his grief.

It was that prostration Konurbay had been watching for. Slipped free of the slaughter, he had crossed the return road by shortcuts, and among the thick trees of Kök-Buluñ, in the half-dark, he had waited with a serpent's patience. He walked Algara forward; the trees were wet, the ground soft, no hoofbeat sounded. The point of his lance was black steel, tempered by the masters of Beecin. The back of a man in prostration was the openest opening in the world, and Konurbay had learned well what Kococaş taught: a warrior does not face a warrior; he watches for the opening.

The lance came down into Manas's back, between the shoulder blades. There was no iron mail upon him; does a man wear armor at prayer? The steel point passed through the flesh, came against the backbone, and there, striking the bone's stubbornness, broke. Manas shuddered; his forehead did not rise from the ground. Konurbay wrenched back the broken shaft and spurred his horse; fleeing, he turned once to look: the man he had struck was still in prostration. That sight would haunt Konurbay's eye to the end of his days — the man who, with broken steel in his back, would not break his prayer.

Manas completed his prayer. He gave the salutation; first to his right, then to his left. Then he rose slowly, and as he rose the world tilted to one side. Bakay and Acıbay, running to him, laid him down upon the felt cloak; from the wound in his back came first not blood but a breath, it seemed — a long, a very long breath.

— It was Konurbay, said Manas; his voice was calm, without anger. He came at me from behind. What valor could not teach him in all these years, his fear has taught him in one night.

They bound the wound; the broken point they could not find; the point had stayed deep within the bone. They wished to lay Manas in a cart; he would not let himself be laid there; he mounted Taytoru, had his waist bound about with a sash, and sat erect. So he passed the defiles; so he crossed the snowy passes; caravan-master of twelve martyrs and of his own death, erect, toward Talas.

The news reached Talas before the caravan; black news travels faster than a horse. Mother Çıyırdı tore her hair; Bakdöölöt rent her collar. But Kanıkey did not weep. Kanıkey, daughter of Temirkan, bride of khans, Kanıkey the composed; she looked long into the face of the warrior who brought the news, then turned without a question, lifted the felt door, and went into the grey yurt. Within, she first built up the fire; then she opened the chest and set out in rows whatever salves, roots, and theriacs had been brought from Egypt and Bukhara; then she bent over six-month-old Semetey's cradle and looked into the sleeping child's face, and only there, only for one breath, her eyes filled. She wiped them. When she came out to the door her face was stone again.

When the caravan came in sight, all Talas was on the road. In front rode Bakay, his white beard on his breast, his head bowed; behind him the carts of the martyrs; in the midst, on Taytoru, bound with sashes, his face yellowed but his back unbent, Manas. The people ranged themselves on either side; the lament caught fire at one end and spread like a blaze to the other. When they lifted Manas from his horse his eyes were closing at last; for

days he had been losing blood, and the steel in the bone was working from within. They laid him on a white-covered bed; at his head Çıyırdı, at his feet Bakay, around him the surviving choros. The khan's breath grew thin, and thinner; death entered the tent like a third person, and sat down.

Then Kanıkey did what no one expected. She took Semetey from the cradle, brought him in his swaddling and laid him at his father's side, and pinched the baby's plump leg — without any mercy at all. Semetey, with his six-month-old lungs, let out a scream that shook the felt of the tent. And at that scream, as when wind touches a dying coal, Manas's eyes opened. The head rose from the pillow; the hand sought the swaddling. The dying khan, at the sound of his son, sat up once more, and took the child into his arms.

— So it was you, he said; his voice was cracked, but he was laughing. It was you who called me. Cry, my foal, cry; your voice has done me more good than forty medicines.

Those in the tent understood that day that Kanıkey's pinch was not mercilessness but mercy itself; a woman's wisdom had torn a few more days from the hand of death.

In those days, one morning, an unaccustomed sound fell upon Talas: a mourning, muffled, unceasing neigh. They looked: Sarala was coming. Almambet's Sarala; the tulpar they had thought left behind by the caravan had been unable to part from the cart that bore the body, and following slow and halting, had in the end taken his master's body upon his own back and, alone, over mountains and passes, brought it to Talas. His mane fallen, his croup sunken, his eyes two wells; but the trust upon his back he had not let fall, not once. The people opened a way; the horse came straight to the front of Manas's tent and stopped, and there he waited until his knees gave way.

They buried Almambet at Çeç-Töbö. By Manas's command they raised his grave high; "Let the grave of the man who came from the Altay and became our brother, who drew the sword against his own homeland for our sake, stand where every passing traveler must bow his head," the khan had said from his bed. After the burial they brought Sarala to the head of the grave. The horse pawed the earth once and rubbed his head against the fresh mound. Bakay's hands trembled as he drew the knife; the sacrificial prayer was read, and Sarala was offered at the head of his master's grave. Some said the horse reached toward the knife of his own will; some said tears came from his eyes. Perhaps both were true; a beast's grief is more honest than a man's.

✦ ✦ ✦

Kanıkey looked to the wound in her husband's back with her own hands. She sent the binders and the herb-healers out of the tent; with a knife passed through boiling water she opened the wound and, working it little by little between two fingers, drenched in sweat, drew out the broken steel point lodged in the bone. The steel lay pitch-black in her palm; on its tip was Manas's blood, and within the blood, Beecin's hatred. Kanıkey showed that fragment to no one; she wrapped it in felt and laid it in the bottom of the chest; let my son grow, she said within herself, and see it, and know who struck his father from behind.

Forty days and forty nights Kanıkey's eyes saw no sleep. By day she tended the wound, by night she counted stars at the door; she reckoned the road of the courier gone to Egypt — that pass is crossed by now, that river is forded, the return falls in such a month. Before one courier returned she dispatched the next; she sent word even to her father Temirkan in Bukhara — send physicians, send herbs, send hope. The inside of the grey yurt smelled of vials, of pouches, of dried roots; something simmered on the hearth without ceasing, and Kanıkey's fingers were stained yellow with salve. Some days Manas would seem to mend; he would mount his horse and ride out as far as the herds and back; the people wept for joy, and Kanıkey did not rejoice. For at night, while her husband slept, she would lay her ear to the wound, and she heard the deep, sly murmuring within the bone; death, entered at the one place the bullet-proof Akolpok could not shield, had made its nest inside.

The wound closed; what was within did not close. The steel was out, but its poison had worked into the bone; the marrow was rotting. Kanıkey sent men to Egypt, dispatched caravans to Bukhara; every medicine that came she tasted first herself and then gave her husband to drink. Forty kinds of salve were laid on, forty kinds of theriac given; the wound's mouth closed like a rose, the bone's core fell away like autumn. Manas wasted day by day; and in defiance of the wasting body, his eyes cleared day by day, grew distant, and came to hold the light of another place.

One evening he called his choros and Bakay to his side. Kanıkey he had seated at his right, Semetey's cradle placed before him. Outside, the autumn wind was combing the poplars of Talas.

— Bakay, my elder, he said. You have been to me a father in place of a father, a mind in place of a mind. When I am gone, it is you who shall bank this hearth's coals, you who shall uncover them. Watch over Kanıkey; her mind is sharper than my sword, but a mind too needs a mountain to lean on.

Bakay's white beard shook upon his breast; he could not give his word, he bowed his head.

— Kanıkey, said Manas, turning to his wife. Send off with few words a man who has much to say to you. I know your labor; I know the hand that stitched winter cloaks for forty warriors in a single night, the patience that wove the Akolpok loop by loop. I do not entrust my son to you; I entrust you to my son. When he is grown, tell him this: his father did not turn from his oath, did not turn from his homeland, did not turn from his prayer.

Then he reached toward the cradle; he laid his whip — the whip of forty campaigns, its haft of white meadowsweet, its braid nine-stranded — beside the child's swaddling.

— This is yours, he said. Until the day comes when you can lift it, let your mother keep it.

Then he raised his head and looked at his choros; at the surviving twenty-eight, one by one, naming each name as he looked. He looked at Kırgıl, he looked at Acıbay; every look was a farewell, and every farewell carried a thousand unspoken words.

— I ask your forgiveness, he said. I drove you from the Altay to the Ala-Too, from the Ala-Too to the gate of Beecin; twelve of our brothers we left in the desert. Forgive me what I owe you. And I have one request: do not scatter until my son can reach his horse's mane; and if you scatter, on the day he speaks your name, go to his side.

That night Manas gave up his soul. In the tent there was a breath, and then there was no breath; the coal on the hearth, touched by no one, went out of itself. And nature stood to mourning before mankind did: that night the moon did not rise; nor did it rise the next night; for six nights the sky hung starless and moonless, like a cauldron scoured of its black. From the hair that mother Çıyırdı, that Bakdöölöt, that the keening women tore out and cast upon the earth, they say, willows sprang up along Talas in the spring; every willow a handful of hair, every branch a lament. The waters of Talas ran turbid that year; the wolf's howl came down into the villages, the flocks of birds lost their way. The people learned that their khan had died from the sky, from the water, from wolf and bird; the human tongue had not had the heart to say it.

The most searing of the laments Kanıkey did not sing; Kanıkey kept silence, and her silence was heavier than a thousand laments. Mother Çıyırdı watched till morning at her son's bedside; with her withered hands she smoothed the coverlet, smoothed it, and smoothed it again, as if, could the coverlet be set right, death too would be set right. The

survivors of the forty choros sat around the tent with their swords cradled in their laps; some old like Kırgıl, some with the mustache barely darkened; the eyes of all were fixed on the same emptiness. Acıbay wrapped the khan's Akkelte in felt, and as he wrapped it his hands — hands that had never trembled in battle — trembled.

Mourning covered Talas like a felt. But Kanıkey's mind was awake even within the mourning. Cakıp's other sons — Abıke, Köböş, born of Bakdöölöt, and their brothers, those six unblessed — had begun, before the sounds of lament had died, to measure the khan's herds, his yambı, his ordo out of the corners of their eyes. Kanıkey saw it: the hand that reaches for property today reaches for the grave tomorrow; that hand would open the khan's tomb, scatter his bones, pull the ring from his finger. Manas's body must lie where those hands could not reach.

At night she summoned Bakay; and with him the masters who had no equal in the cutting of stone. She named the black crag of Eçkilik; into the breast of that crag, sheer and forbidding, which even the goat could barely climb, a hollow would be carved — a hidden tomb that to any eye without would seem a crack in the rock. The masters were taken there under oath; not in forty days but in nine nights, by lamplight, muffling the hammer's voice in felts, they carved the rock. On the tenth night, while the moon still did not rise, Manas's body was wrapped in white felt and carried up to Eçkilik on the shoulders of four warriors, no torch lit, by starlight alone. Kanıkey walked before; in her arms Semetey slept. The body was laid in the rock hollow, the prayers were read in whispers, the hollow's mouth was walled with dressed stone and plastered over the color of the crag. When morning came, the black crag of Eçkilik was yesterday's crag; no eye could know that a khan lay there. Those who knew were as few as the fingers of one hand, and every one had sworn an oath upon his death.

As for the people — the people too must have a grave; a place to pour out their grief, a mound where a man might dismount and bow his head. Bakay had the tallest poplar of Talas felled, and through nine of the nine days, with his own hands, he carved a Manas of wood; its height the khan's height, its shoulders the khan's shoulders. The wooden Manas was wrapped in white felt, dressed in the khan's cloak, crowned with his helmet, and with great ceremony, before the eyes of all Talas, with laments, sacrifices, and races of swift horses, buried beneath a high barrow. The people believed they had buried their khan; and belief is, most times, more merciful than the truth itself. Abıke and Köböş too looked

upon that barrow; whatever passed through their hearts, it passed in ignorance of the black crag's secret.

Winter came and went. The fortieth day of mourning was given, the year drew near; the turn came to the great feast, the memorial feast of Manas. In his lifetime the khans, those who had sworn oaths of friendship, who had drunk his kımız and taken his yambı, had promised with one voice: "If Manas passes, we will come to his feast, run our horses, and set our cauldrons boiling." Kanıkey and Bakay sent messenger upon messenger; Kökçö was no more, to him no messenger went; but to the living khans, to every tribe far and near, the word flew. And when the day of the feast came, the cauldrons of Talas boiled, the tables were spread — and no one came. Some feared Konurbay; some looked to the living power that follows the dead; for some the excuse was snow, for others flood. Only old Koşoy, the white-bearded balban of the Katagan, rose up and came all the way from At-Başı; and with him a few poor herdsmen, those whose hearths had known Manas's salt. Koşoy, passing between the empty tables, looked at no one; he took Bakay's hand and said one thing only:

— When a man dies, it seems his friends die too, Bakay. Let us at least not die.

Koşoy stayed three days. On the third evening, before he left, he stood before the barrow; he looked long at the mound where the wooden Manas lay — whether he knew or did not know, no one could tell; there is no reading meaning in the eye of an old wolf. Then he bent over Semetey's cradle, touched his white beard to the baby's palm, and when those tiny fingers gripped the beard, Koşoy's stone face softened for the first time.

— The grip is his father's grip, he said. Do not grieve, Kanıkey; a hearth whose coals are covered in ash burns again when it finds one to blow on them.

Kanıkey did not have those empty tables cleared; one day, two days, three days she let them stand. Then she rose, covered the cauldrons with her own hand, and that day buried a seed within herself: one day this feast must be given so — as if avenging these tables — that the world shall not have seen its like. That seed would sprout years later, in other hands, at another feast; but that is the word of another chapter.

Semetey grew in his cradle; his father's whip hung at the head of his swaddling. Some nights, nursing the child, Kanıkey would look at the whip, from the whip to the child, from the child to the dark bulk of Eçkilik in the blackness, and turn over once more the thought she told no one: the coal of this hearth now lay in this swaddling, and those who wished to put the coal out sat just beyond the door, in the tents of her own husband's kin. Abıke's eye had turned from the property now to the widow and the throne; Köböş was

being whetted in his elder brother's shadow. Before the cloud of mourning had scattered from over Talas, another cloud, blacker, lower, was gathering.

One night, while the wind beat the felt of the grey yurt, Kanıkey sat bolt upright at the head of the cradle; she did not sleep. Whether there was the sound of a rider far off, or whether it was the water of Talas striking the stones, she could not tell. She pressed Semetey, still swaddled, to her breast, and whispered into the darkness, to herself, like an oath:

— Your father did not turn back, and neither will I. If it must be, the road will open even to Bukhara, to my father's hearth; but you shall live, my foal. While you live, Manas is not to be counted dead.

The wind beat the felt once more; as if someone stood just outside the door, listening to what was within.

BOOK II

SEMETEY

The Return to the Homeland

❖ ❖ ❖

CHAPTER 13

Mourning, Exile, and the Road to Buhara

— ❖ —

Forty days had not yet passed since the death of Manas. The funeral feast of black mourning had not been given, the cauldrons had not been set up, the lament that was the dead man's due had not yet fallen silent, when treachery settled over Talas like a black cloud. That cloud brought no rain, cast no shade; it brought blood, it brought plunder, it brought orphans. And the hand that drove it across the sky of Talas was no stranger's hand — it was the hand of Semetey's own grandfather, of Manas's own father, of Han Cakıp.

Since his son's body had gone into the earth, the old khan had fixed his eye upon property. At night he did not sleep; he counted the horse herds on his fingers, counted the camels, counted the silver ingots in the storehouse. By day he had the table laid in his grey yurt, had raki poured into the boza like poison, gathered the six villains — Abıke, Köböş, Çıybıt, Koçkor, Adıbay, Kölbay — at his knee, and whispered into their ears:

— The dead man is dead, he said one evening, resting his bowl of kımız on his knee. The lion is gone; his den remains. In the den sits a widow. Temirkan's daughter is young, thirty-two years of age; the widow's right of the levirate is our right. An elder brother's widow is lawful to the younger brother; the ancient custom so commands. Let one of you take Kanıkey, let the wealth stay in one place, let the treasure gather into one hand. Blessed be the man who knows his business before the pup in the cradle grows into a dog.

The pup in the cradle of whom he spoke was his own grandson Semetey — six months old, in swaddling bands, an orphan lying at his mother's breast. Cakıp's voice did not tremble as he said it, his hand did not falter; he drained the bowl and smoothed his moustache. Old age leads some men to wisdom and some to greed; the love of wealth had wound itself around Cakıp more deeply than grief for his son. The man who once, in the exile of Altay, had wept "give me a son," now called that son's son a pup. The six villains drank these words like boza and swallowed them like raki. They drew the forty companions to their side as well — forty dogs come from forty places, who knew no debt of salt, who kept no oath of bread. Those who had stood bent double before Manas while he lived came, before his forty days of mourning were out, as suitors to his widow's door.

First they went to Akılay. Akılay, Manas's elder wife, bowed her head and yielded her neck to fate; she spoke no word, drew no dagger. Then the turn came to Kanıkey. They sent Kırgılçal and Tazbaymat as envoys; both were men who had eaten rich meat at Manas's table in their time, who had worn the kaftans Kanıkey had sewn.

That day Kanıkey was sitting in her grey yurt; Semetey in her lap, her mother-in-law Çıyırdı, eighty years old, at her knee. Kırgılçal came in through the doorway and spoke without removing his cap:

— Daughter of Temirkan, he said, you cannot remain in this land with a widow's head. So the custom has commanded, so the elders have decreed. You will go to one of them — if not today, then tomorrow.

Kanıkey rose slowly. There was neither tear nor pleading in her face; the face of Temirkan's daughter was like the Ala-Too in winter — distant, white, cold. Her voice was low, but it was like steel:

— Manas's forty days are not out, his funeral feast has not been given, she said. His bones have not yet cooled. And you are dividing up his widow. Go, and tell the one who sent you: Kanıkey was the wife of Manas, and as the wife of Manas she will die.

Tazbaymat grinned, took a step, and reached for the woman's wrist. In that instant Kanıkey's hand went to Aktinte, lying beneath her sash. Aktinte was Manas's gift; a dagger with a silver sheath and an edge like poison. The woman swung it once, swung it twice; with the first stroke she sheared away half of Kırgılçal's haunch, with the second she cut through Tazbaymat's shoulder blade together with two of his ribs. The two envoys went out through the doorway spilling their blood and howling at the top of their lungs; Kanıkey wiped her dagger on her hem, sat down, and nursed her son.

The blood of the envoys inflamed the rage of the six villains beyond all measure. They called a council at the ordo and gathered; at the table the boza foamed, the raki was poured, oaths were sworn. In that assembly only one man rose to his feet: Iraman's son, Irçıuul, honey of tongue and fire of heart. He rose, walked to the centre, and laid his hand upon his breast:

— Lords, he said, let me recount Manas to you. You came hungry, and he fed you; you came on foot, and he set you on horses; you came naked, and he dressed you in kaftans. The coat on Kırgıl's back is his, the horse beneath Abıke is his, the sword at Köböş's belt is his. Now his orphan of six months lies in the cradle. If you are men, guard that orphan until he reaches his twelfth year; settle your accounts with him then, on the field of combat. He who divides a man's widow before his forty days are out, who parcels his goods before his funeral feast is given — what shall we call him, if not a dog?

No one listened. A bowl flew at him, a whip was raised against him. Irçıuul saw that words would not carry and oaths would not hold; he took his life into his bosom, mounted his horse in the dark of night, and fled. Thus fell silent the last tongue in Talas that spoke the truth.

The next day the six villains swore the oath of plunder. They seated Köböş on the white felt and raised him sultan; Han Cakıp gave his blessing, the forty companions lifted their swords. Then they marched on Tört-Kül, the great ordo of Manas.

No one could keep the reckoning of that pillage. Herd was driven into herd, flock was struck into flock; the wealth was so vast that a lifetime would not suffice to count it, and they measured it out by whip-lengths and divided it. The treasury that held six hundred camel-loads of gold was emptied; the chests were broken open, the felts torn away, and the white ordo where Manas had sat was rolled up from its post and brought down. They threw ropes over the mosque and pulled; the dome collapsed, the mihrab crumbled into dust. One man alone rose to defend the ordo single-handed — Bayçoro. He fought, and

fought, until his blood ran dry; in the end they swarmed over him, bound his arms with straps, and took him captive.

That day Kanıkey stood at the threshold of the ordo; she stood so that at the least they should not trample Manas's hearth. Coobuzar, the slave-child she had raised in her bosom and nursed with her own milk, clung weeping to her hem. Köböş spurred his horse and came; he looked first at the child, then at the woman. He drew his sword and clove Coobuzar in two with a single stroke; then he raised his battle-axe and brought it down on Kanıkey's right shoulder. Bone cracked, blood spurted; Temirkan's daughter sank to her knees, blood came from her mouth, but she did not cry out. Köböş laughed and turned his horse:

— This is how a widow is taught her manners, he said, and vanished into the plunder.

Kanıkey, vomiting blood, crawling on her hands, came to the threshold of death and turned back from it. Night fell; in the empty yurt left over from the pillage three souls remained: a mother-in-law of eighty, an orphan of six months, and a mother whose shoulder hung in pieces. The world begrudged these three souls even a yurt's worth of ground.

That night the wedding drum beat in Talas. Torches burned in Köböş's ordo, boza flowed, the forty companions drank and drank and mounted Manas's horses, made sport with Manas's kaftans. The sound of the drum struck the mountain on the wind and came back from the mountain to the empty yurt. Çıyırdı covered her ears with both hands; Kanıkey did not. She listened; she carved every beat into her heart, notch by notch. Not to forget was also a weapon, and it was the only weapon left in her hand.

That night Kanıkey made her decision. She found the Sır barañ musket left from Manas; it had no bullet and no flint, but it carried her husband's scent — she took it for a staff. She bound the grey pouch, the Boz kise, to her waist, and thrust Aktinte into her sash. Then she knelt before Çıyırdı:

— Mother, she said, if we stay here, tomorrow they will strangle Semetey in his cradle. Take the child and make for the mountains; there is a blessed cave called Kara-Üñkür, beyond Kara-Kır. I will guard your rear, I will wipe out your tracks, I will overtake you on the road.

The woman of eighty bound her six-month-old grandson, swaddling and all, to her breast. She had no sandals; her boots had gone in the plunder; she walked barefoot.

Barefoot she crossed the Çatkal, barefoot she trod the snows of Buura-Beli; stone cut her sole, thorn split her heel, and she did not turn to look behind her. Çıyırdı, who had once carried Manas in her womb, was now carrying Manas's son away on her back; fate had turned, had circled, and had laid the same burden twice upon the same woman.

✦ ✦ ✦

Kanıkey, for her part, turned her face toward Kara-Kır; there, on a desolate slope, stood the tomb of Manas — the grave she had raised in secret, with her own hands. She came to it, fell upon its threshold, and clawed at the earth with her nails:

— Rise, she said, my lion, rise. They have plundered your ordo, they have torn down your mosque, they have stretched a sword over your son's cradle. Rise and look, if only once.

The earth gave no answer; the earth never gives answer. But as the sun was setting, a white-bearded dervish appeared from the shadow of the tomb; his staff was taller than himself, his cloak was patched. He stood at the woman's head, did not bend, did not pity; he spoke harshly:

— The eyes of one who weeps for the dead run dry; the road opens for one who labours for the living. Rise, daughter of Temirkan. You have no father now, no brother, no husband; you have no kin but your own striving. Take striving for your kin, and set out upon the road.

When Kanıkey lifted her head the dervish was gone; on the slope there was only the wind, and the red of evening. Leaning on the Sır barañ, the woman rose to her feet. She looked at the tomb one last time; she did not weep this time, only laid her hand on the earth and took its coldness into her palm. — I will not bring your son to you dead, she said; I will bring him a man, I will bring him mounted, I will bring him with his vengeance taken. No kin but striving — she pressed the dervish's words upon her heart like a brand, and walked toward the mountain, toward Kara-Üñkür.

In the cave three souls were joined; joined, but hunger joined with them. Six days passed; Kanıkey's milk failed, and Semetey no longer had strength even to cry. On the sixth day vultures wheeled in the sky; they wheeled, they quarrelled, and from their talons a piece of liver fell. Kanıkey flung herself upon that liver like a mother bird; she warmed it on the

embers and pressed its juice to the child's lips. Heaven had given; when Heaven gives, the servant endures.

But the liver was for one day, and hunger was for every day. On the seventh day Kanıkey went down to the plain and saw a dun calf strayed from Karımbay's herd. Karımbay was a rich man, his wealth beyond counting; nor was he a stranger — he was the man who had stood sponsor-father at Kanıkey's wedding, who had sat at her bread, who had received her blessing. He will not begrudge one calf to an orphan's cauldron, the woman said to herself, and set off after the calf.

The calf fled, the woman pursued. Once they circled the skirts of Üç-Koşoy, and twice; round and round Beles-Taş they turned. A woman with a wounded shoulder, an empty belly, bare feet; but she did not fall, did not let go, and at last she pinned the calf in the marsh and threw her arms around its neck. She held it — and a shadow grew at her nape: Karımbay, looking down from his horse.

— Sponsor-father, said Kanıkey, the orphan's tongue is cleaving to his palate with hunger. One calf...

A whip cut off her words. Karımbay struck once with the whip, struck twice, struck three times; the wife of the khan before whom he had once stood with folded hands, at whose wedding table he had eaten bread, he left bleeding in the mud of the marsh, and drove his calf before him and went off swollen with pride. And as he went he muttered:

— The khanate is gone; beggary remains. Let everyone know their place.

Kanıkey raised herself from the mud. She did not weep. Weeping was no longer her portion; she had long since turned her mourning into striving, and she had no kin but striving. She rose, returned to the cave, and set her eye on the last living creature left from Manas — the grey he-goat.

She bound the goat by its legs and turned it toward the qibla. She drew out the knife, then brought the swaddled Semetey, laid the child's tiny hand upon the knife's haft, and closed her own hand over it:

— This sacrifice is the sacrifice of Semetey, son of Manas, she said. Accept it.

She recited the suras she knew, and drew the knife. She set up Manas's soul-cauldron — the black cauldron that boiled when he rode to war, that was food to the friend and terror to the foe — at the mouth of the cave, and cooked the goat's flesh. The mother-in-

law of eighty ate her fill, the babe of six months ate his fill; the bones were laid to one side, apart and clean. Those bones had work yet to see; but no one knew it that night.

The cave was blessed, but the cave was hidden; what stays hidden is prey, and after prey comes the hunter. Kanıkey knew this. She thought of the Buhara road, of the land of her father Temirkan; her heart twisted, but she resolved upon the road. Çıyırdı, who did not wish to go — old age had cut the strength from her legs — she bound to her back with a strap; she wrapped Semetey at her waist, took the Sır barañ for a staff, and walked.

Seven days she walked, seven nights she walked; sleep did not enter her eyes, boots did not enter upon her feet. In bare stockings she crossed the pass of Çapçık, crossed the pass of Küyük, crossed the pass of Corgo; she left Oluya-Ata behind, left Çoñ-Merki behind, left Kazı-Kurt behind. By day the heat struck her, by night the frost bit; stone split her soles, snow froze her heels. Whenever Çıyırdı wept on her back — Set me down, daughter, leave me, I have lived my life — Kanıkey drew the strap one hole tighter: — You are the woman who bore Manas, mother; whoever abandons you abandons Manas. On her back a life of eighty years, at her waist a hope of six months; between two burdens a woman measured the steppe with her strides. Until the Sır-Derya rose before her.

The river was in flood. The spring waters had burst loose from the mountains, and the Sır-Derya was running foam-flecked, like a herd of horses gone mad. There was no raft and no ford; no bridge and no boatman. Kanıkey sank down on the bank and for the first time felt her knees give way.

✦ ✦ ✦

In those days there lived on the Beş-Taş pastures an old man: Bakay. Bakay, the counselling father of Manas, the lamp of his road, herded camels with five hundred households, lived by his own fat, and paid the six villains not so much as a stone in tribute. He paid nothing, for he knew: the share given to a dog only whets the dog's appetite.

One night a wolf of unease entered Bakay's heart. In his dream he saw a black cloud, beneath the cloud a burning hearth, and at the hearth a weeping woman. He did not wait for morning; he caught and saddled his Kök Tulpar and rode for Talas. When he reached Tört-Kül the day was breaking — and the breaking day lit nothing but a bare hillock. There

was no ordo, no yurt, no herd, no living soul; great Tört-Kül lay stripped naked as a shorn sheep. The wind was scattering the dust of the torn-up felts.

Bakay dismounted and sank down beside the hearth that had turned to ash. Tears ran down his beard; for a moment, one single moment, he thought of dying — after such ruin, living weighed heavy on the old man. Then he remembered the cradle, and the one in the cradle.

— No, he said to himself, aloud. If one spark is left of Manas, I will be that spark's ash-bed. I will live for Semetey.

He rose, mounted, and set out searching. He searched Kara-Buura — nothing. He searched the Çatkal — nothing. He combed Üç-Koşoy span by span — not a sandal print, not a hearth-mark, nothing at all. He asked the herdsmen he met on the road; some did not know, and some knew and feigned not to, out of fear — the six villains had an ear in every camp and a tongue in every cauldron. Days passed; the old man's hope wore thinner and thinner. At last he remembered Manas's wonder-working hound: Kumayık. Kumayık, of whom they said he was born of a bird's nestling, and would not lose a scent though seven years had passed over the trail.

He loosed Kumayık toward Kara-Üñkür. The hound went sniffing over mountain and stone until it came to the mouth of the cave, and there it stopped, at the bones laid on a clean ledge: they were the bones of the grey goat. It sniffed once, sniffed twice, howled once at the sky; then it put its nose to the ground and sprang away. Bakay followed. Kumayık scented and ran; it traced Çapçık, Küyük, Corgo; it followed the track of a woman's foot, of a bare stocking, of mother's milk dripped and dried. The trail ran down to the Sır-Derya.

And on the river's bank, hope was running out. Kanıkey looked at the water, and the water looked at her; there was no crossing. The woman's head fell to her breast:

— So it ends here, mother, she said. Shall I give Manas's son to the river, or turn back and give him to the dogs?

Çıyırdı, eighty years old, straightened; she took her daughter-in-law's face in both hands and looked into her eyes:

— Grief pays no debts, daughter, she said. The eyes of the weeper go blind; the road of the seeker opens. You are Temirkan's daughter; if you fall to your knees, at whom shall this child look to rise to his feet?

Kanıkey lifted her head — and saw a dust on the horizon. The dust grew, and out of the dust came a grey-blue horse, and on the horse a white-bearded old man: Bakay. Kök Tulpar reached the bank lathered in foam; the old man threw himself from the horse, the two women ran to him; the three embraced and wept together. Tears, that day, were not weakness; tears, that day, were the salt of reunion.

Bakay took the swaddled Semetey and raised him to the sky with both hands; the six-month-old child, between heaven and the old man, blinked his eyes at the sun.

— O spirit of Manas, hear me, said Bakay. O forty çilten, bear witness. Until this orphan reaches his twelfth year and returns to Talas, until he takes his vengeance with his own sword, I, Bakay, will make no peace with the six villains; I will not eat their salt, I will not return their greetings, and wherever they fall into my hands I will strike them. Let my oath be an oath; if I turn from it, let the oath strike me down.

Çıyırdı took the swaddled child back and pressed him to her breast; Kanıkey clasped the old man's hand:

— You were Manas's wisdom, she said; now be his orphan's wing. Whom have we left but you?

— There is more, said Bakay; in heaven there remains the spirit of Manas, and on earth an old man like me, past the noon of his day. And if those two are not enough, there is your striving; and that is greater than all.

The oath was sworn; but the river still lay before them, and rivers do not heed oaths. Bakay went down to the bank and made his ablutions. He turned his face to the qibla; he called upon Kocosan, called upon Ak Eşen, called upon the forty çilten; he prayed to the spirit of Almambet, fallen on the Beecin road, and to the spirit of Çubak:

— The last seed of the homeland for which you laid down your heads lies in this swaddling. Give way.

Then he set his musket Kök çıbık to his shoulder and fired into the breast of the raging river.

There came a sound like thunder; it came, and the waters stopped. The water from above swelled and heaped as though it had struck an unseen dam, and waited; the water below drained away, the bed dried, the pebbles came out into the sun. Bakay led the two women, the child, and the horses across the dry bed; the instant the last foot touched the far bank, the water waiting above broke loose with a roar, and the river bellowed shut

behind them. The Sır-Derya became the Sır-Derya once more; but the four souls standing on its bank were souls now borrowed back from death. Çıyırdı opened her hands and prayed; Kanıkey looked one last time at the far bank, at the homeland left behind. The water lay between the two like a sword: on one side yesterday, on the other tomorrow.

Bakay led the little caravan to Kara-Kır, to blessed Kara-Üñkür. The cave's mouth would admit but one person at a time, yet within it could hold six thousand sheep; warm in winter, cool in summer, a blessed fold. The old man went up the mountain and hunted six wild ewes and four mountain rams; he hung the meat out in plenty, split seven days' firewood, laid in a month's provisions. Then he gave his charge:

— I am returning to Talas; I will seek out the orphan's herds, the orphan's due. If I do not return within six or seven days, count me dead; scatter the provisions, do not look back, flee to Bukar, to Karakan. Keep the child alive — the rest is story.

Kanıkey climbed to the mouth of the cave and watched the old man go. The darkness swallowed horse and rider both; only the sound of hooves remained, and that too thinned and was erased. The woman turned back inside; she stirred the embers of the hearth, straightened her child's swaddling, and did not sleep. That night too she did not sleep; sleep, now, was as a thing forbidden her.

✦ ✦ ✦

In Talas, the numberless herds of Manas were in the hands of Camgırçı of the Eştek. Bakay found him on the pasture; no greeting, no good-morrow — he levelled his lance and hurled the man from his horse. Camgırçı, on the ground, the lance-point at his chest, spread his hands:

— Do not strike, Bakay, he said. I am no plunderer; I am a trustee. The six villains would have taken the herds too; I said "this is the Eştek's share" and held them in my hand, that they might remain for the orphan. If you do not believe me, see the trusts.

His life was spared; he rose, swore his oath, and delivered up the trusts one by one. The gold-collared double armour and the verse-inscribed coat that Er Töştük had vowed to the orphan; a fine Buhara-work cloak for Kanıkey; the tulpar Taytoru — a mare full-maned, full-tailed, fire-eyed — given by Koşoy, khan of the Katagan, at Manas's mourning with the words "this is the orphan's share"; and the saddle Akkañkı, gold of pommel and silver of

cantle, left in trust by Almambet when he rode out on the Beecin campaign. Bakay loaded up the trusts; and as he loaded them, that night one more wonder came: Akborçuk, Çıyırdı's horse, broke its tether and came of its own accord, came and stood beside Kök Tulpar. Even the beast knew its master's road; only man did not.

On the way back, near Kara-Taş, a lame man came out to meet Bakay. One hand could not hold a sword, one leg swept the ground; his face was scars, his back was scars — it was Bölökbay, keeper of Manas's treasury, the master who understood the tongue of iron. He had fought the six villains for twelve days, taken seventy wounds, and held the Car-Kıya pass alone with his forty-knobbed club; he had not saved the treasury, but he had saved his honour. He took Bakay's hand:

— I can no longer sit a horse, he said, but I can wait. I will keep my hearth burning at Kara-Taş and wait twelve years for Semetey; I swear it. Carry my word to Kanıkey: let her lay aside her old grudge and go to her father's land. Let her give the child to her own brother Ismayıl as a stranger's son, that the secret of his blood may not leak abroad; at five let her set him in Buhara's mosque, to learn; at twelve let her show him Talas, that he may know it. And take this grey he-goat — let it be the baabedin sacrifice upon the road, that the road may open.

— You are a master of iron, Bölökbay, said Bakay; the word of iron is iron. Twelve years do not pass quickly, but they pass. Do not let your hearth go out.

The two old men embraced; one lame, one in mourning, both bound by oath. Bakay took the word into his bosom and the goat onto his crupper, and rode.

But the women he hoped to find at Kara-Üñkür were not at Kara-Üñkür. Kanıkey had sat in the cave three days, and on the fourth day she could bear it no longer; the hollow had come to feel like a cage. Perhaps Bakay is dead, perhaps the trail has found us — so saying, she had bound Çıyırdı to her back again, wrapped Semetey at her waist, and set out on foot. Five days' road she took in a single march; her back, where the strap bound it, was sliced like the strap itself, her bones broke through her skin and stood out; she walked.

One evening, in the middle of the steppe, they came to a single great tree: the blessed Bayterek. Its trunk was ten fathoms round; its shade could shelter a whole camp. The two women sank down at its foot, and sleep took them in an instant. And while they slept, a branch of the Bayterek bent down; from the bending branch, like a white spring, milk gushed forth. Out of the steppe came a white doe, an Ak maral with antlers of twelve tines — its gait was not the gait of a beast, its bearing not the bearing of a beast; these were saints

in the guise of beasts, Çıyırdı would say afterwards. The maral came, took to its breast the six-month-old Semetey, whose swaddling loosened of itself, and suckled him; the child drank his fill. The milk that remained ran upon the ground, and where it ran it became six pails of white curd, and stood at the women's heads.

When Çıyırdı woke she saw the curd, caught the scent of milk on the child's mouth, and opened her hands to the sky:

— This is the glad tidings of Manas's guardian spirits, daughter, she said. This night I saw it in my dream: the old man Kızır came and clasped hands with the orphan. "Let him stay in Bukar until his twelfth year," he said, "and become a lion greater than his father." Heaven has not forsaken us; let us not forsake the road.

Bakay, meanwhile, seeing the empty cave, had felt his heart leap into his mouth, and had thrown himself upon their tracks. He tracked them across the steppe; the print of a bare stocking, a drop of blood, a scrap of strap — he followed, and followed, and beyond the Bayterek he found them. At the sight of Kanıkey the old man's knees gave way: the woman was skin and bone; her back, where the strap had cut it, was sliced in strips; but her eye was still like the winter of the Ala-Too — distant, white, unconquered. They came together, embraced, and wept; it was the third weeping, but this time there was joy within the tears.

Bakay poured out the trusts: Taytoru he gave into Kanıkey's hand, Akborçuk into Çıyırdı's; the fine cloak he laid on the woman's shoulders, the double armour and the verse-inscribed coat he set at the head of the child's cradle. Bölökbay's grey goat was slaughtered as the baabedin sacrifice; Manas's soul-cauldron boiled once more, and four souls ate once more from the same cauldron. When the meal was done, Bakay brought the talk round to Buhara; he brought it round, and struck a wall.

— I will not go to that door, said Kanıkey. Though I die, I will not look upon my father's face.

— Girl, said Bakay, you have gone hungry, you have been widowed, you have been driven into exile; is it stubbornness that remains in you still?

— Not stubbornness — an oath, said Kanıkey. In my bridal days Manas asked my father for Aktulpar, as a gift for Almambet. He poured seventy loads of gold before him. My father would not give it; and because I was the daughter of a man who begrudged a horse to his guest, I fell from favour six months in my husband's arms, six months I could

not lift my head. That day I vowed: though I die, I will not look upon that face. Temirkan's daughter does not turn from her vow.

Bakay pleaded — in vain. Bakay grew angry, struck the ground with his whip — in vain. Çıyırdı, eighty years old, interceded — in vain. In the middle of the steppe, on one side the swords of the six villains, on the other an oath like stone; the road was closed.

Then, out of the sunset, a dark figure drew near: on his head a white turban big as a cauldron, on his back a patched cloak — a dervish. He gave no greeting, asked no name; he looked once at the swaddled child, then turned to Kanıkey:

— This child of yours will grow in Bukar, he said. He will grow, learn his lineage, return to his homeland, be joined to his homeland; he will be a man to equal his father. Do not bar his road, mother.

Kanıkey lifted her head — the dervish was gone. The steppe lay flat, empty as far as the eye could reach; not a dust, not a track. The white-bearded one at the tomb came into the woman's mind; if this was the one they call Kızır, then he had come twice, had twice shown the way. Kanıkey knelt where she stood and laid her face to the earth:

— I bow my neck, she said. The oath was my oath; the child is greater than my oath. I will go to Bukar; I will not look on my father's face, but I will shelter at his threshold. I will raise Semetey with his lineage hidden until his twelfth year; I will give him to my brother Ismayıl as a stranger's son, at five I will set him in the mosque, at twelve I will show him Talas. And if at twelve this child asks, I will tell him everything.

Bakay too struck his knee to the ground and laid his hand on the child's swaddling:

— And I will stay in Talas, he said. I will herd camels, seem a slave, and be an eye. I will watch for Celmayan, the camel that mourns for Manas; I will keep watch on the six blades fallen into Köböş's hand — Zulpukor, the two Coykuma, Açalbars, Kılbolot, Arkesken; whichever dog they pass to, I will hold their trail. When the orphan returns, let him strike with the very steel his father struck with. This covenant is a covenant to the spirit of Manas; may he who breaks it never prosper.

The covenant was made; in the middle of the steppe, in the shade of the Bayterek, the witnesses were the stars in the sky, two horses on the earth, and a six-month-old child asleep in his swaddling. The next morning the roads parted: Bakay turned Kök Tulpar's head toward Talas, toward darkness, toward twelve years of waiting; Kanıkey set Çıyırdı upon

Akborçuk, pressed Semetey to her breast, took Taytoru's rein in her hand, and turned her face toward Buhara.

The road was long. By day they travelled, by night they rested; stage by stage, pass by pass, they drew near to Buhara. Taytoru walked quietly at the side of the woman who led her, now and then turning her head to sniff the swaddling — as if she knew what trust it was she carried; a tulpar knows, a tulpar waits. The Sır-Derya was behind them, Talas behind, the tomb of Manas behind. Once the woman turned and looked — the Ala-Too stood on the horizon like a white kerchief of mourning. She did not look again. The child in her arms stirred in his sleep and clenched his tiny fist; the mother looked at that fist and saw the far side of twelve years: Taytoru at full gallop, the dust of Talas, an orphan's return. For now it all fit within one swaddling; but swaddlings open, fists grow, and as rivers had closed, so roads would open. Kanıkey quickened her step; the minarets of Buhara were not yet in sight, but they were no longer far.

CHAPTER 14

Taytoru's Race and the Rise of Semetey

— ❖ —

When the thick walls of Buhara were stained crimson with the daybreak that morning, a young warrior standing before the gate amid sixty champions ran toward the dust-covered travellers and leapt from his horse. This was the only son born to Temir Han after twelve daughters; his name was Ismayıl, and the moment he looked into the face of the weary woman before him, the strength went out of his knees. However much the dust veiled it, however much mourning had faded it, that face was the face of his own sister.

— Kanıkey! he cried. My sister! Bride of Talas, wife of Han Manas! What state is this, what black day is this?

Kanıkey sat erect upon her horse; widowed at thirty-two, she had pressed her swaddled son to her breast and fled the cruelty of the six villains without once uttering a cry of grief. Now, at the sound of her brother's voice, the springs of her eyes overflowed, but her voice did not tremble.

— This is what they call a black day, Ismayıl, she said. Han Manas has passed away, and Talas is left an orphan. Abıke and Köböş have set their eyes on their elder brother's throne, his wealth, his wife. The six villains thirst for the blood of an infant at the breast. So I took my son and threw myself upon the roads.

The road had been long, the road had been merciless. Bakay Han had made them ready for the road at midnight, had drawn out Taytoru — given by Koşoy on the day of mourning — for Kanıkey, and Akborçuk for old Çıyırdı; he had loaded onto the crupper the arrow-proof fine cloak and the heaven-sent Boz kise, had written a letter to Temir Han, and had sworn, "Twelve years I shall wait for word." They had skirted Kokand, skirted Semerkand, kept far from the Ancıyan of fork-bearded Sınçıbek. Eleven days and eleven nights they had crossed the waterless desert, and caught their breath in Küleşen's forest of Kül-Tokoy. When Kanıkey came to Keñ-Kölçük, the paradise garden of her girlhood, she found the lake dried up and the plane trees dead, and she fell down and wept; then, at Çıyırdı's counsel, when they turned the black turf at the head of the dried spring with the enchanted lance made by the master Bölökbay, water burst from beneath the earth, the lake filled, and a nightingale alighted on the bough. That day the old mother had opened her hands to the sky: this is a favourable omen; Semetey's road is open.

Now they stood at that road's end. Ismayıl took his sister on his arm and brought her into the city; the gates of Temir Han's palace were thrown open wide. Kanıkey went to her father's knee and poured out, one by one, all that the six villains had done to her; then she unwound the swaddling and laid her son before them.

— I entrust this orphan to you, Ismayıl, she said. Take him according to the custom: have his forelock shorn, pass him through the dog's bowl, leap him over the sword's edge. Know him as your own child, call him your own child. Let no one call him a stranger's son! Let them not say his mother is I, let them not say his father is Manas; if the secret is uncovered, the orphan's head is forfeit.

Ismayıl did as she said. They had the child's forelock shorn, passed him through the dog's bowl, leapt him over the sword's edge; through the seven quarters of Buhara the criers proclaimed: a son is born to Ismayıl, and his name is Semetey. For seventeen days the feast was given; cauldrons boiled, herds were slaughtered, kımız flowed like a river. On the seventeenth day of the feast the Urus guests and the Kıtay guests gazed long into the child's face, leaned to one another, and whispered:

— If this orphan lives, he will break the Oyrot and shake the world.

Temir Han bestowed on his daughter hundreds of hearths of retainers; he gave Kanıkey a palace of her own, pastures of her own, herds of her own. And Semetey began to grow, believing himself the son of Ismayıl, taking his own mother for his elder sister.

The years passed like clouds passing over the steppe. Kanıkey raised her son from afar; she could not give him her milk, could not lull him to sleep on her knee, could not lift him when he fell. At feasts, in the public squares, from behind the lattice, she watched; whenever the child called her "sister," she let no one sense that something within her broke. At night she would sit turned toward Talas; she would remember the snows of the Ala-Too, the waters of Keñ-Kol, the laughter of the forty companions around the hearth, and when the dawn whitened she would wash her face and go out among people composed and stately. Twelve years I shall wait for word, Bakay had said; the years were falling away one by one, and no word came.

The child grew; and as he grew, the fire within him grew. At seven he shot the bow, at nine he rode down horses, at eleven he was throwing to the ground any young man who tried his arm. They gave him to a teacher; the teacher could not endure him. They gave him to a mullah; the mullah fled. By the time he reached twelve he had beaten eighty teachers and made a hundred mullahs weep; if he entered the bazaar, the bazaar scattered; if he went into the street, the street emptied. At last the city rose up; the tradesmen shut their shops and massed at Temir Han's gate.

— O khan, they said, this ungovernable orphan will finish either us or this city. Either find a remedy or show us a road.

Temir Han thought long that night. He thought with his beard gathered in his palm, thought as he drew his prayer beads through his fingers. At last the word within him came out: this child is a river in flood, no dam will hold before him; a channel must be opened for him. The funeral feast of the departed Han Manas had not yet been given; let the feast be given, let the grandson be raised to a throne, let the flooding water be poured into the bed of khanship. He had a decree written and sent couriers to eight khans: come, come to the feast of Manas; there will be a horse race, and the first prize will be a thousand dark-brown camels, a thousand mares, and seven houses full of treasure.

When the couriers had scattered to the four quarters, Kanıkey looked into the distance from the roof of her own palace, then went down to the stable. Taytoru of the sixty noble bloodlines stood there, her aged head bowed to the manger; the horse given by Koşoy on

the day of mourning, the horse that had crossed the eleven-day desert, the horse that had carried an orphan on her back. Kanıkey threw her arms around the horse's neck.

— O Taytoru, she said, they call you aged, they call you spent. But you have not forgotten the scent of Talas; I know it. If you take the lead in this race, my son's fortune opens; if you fall behind, may I die before my appointed hour. Be it sworn: our two fates are one rope now; either it snaps together or it pulls together.

From that night on, while Buhara slept, Kanıkey was awake. In the middle of the night she would slip the horse out secretly and gallop her through the cool dark of the desert; before dawn whitened she would bring her back and wipe down her sweat with her own hand. She measured the barley herself, carried the water herself, combed the mane herself; the first days she walked her by the lead, then raised her to a trot, then to a gallop. When the sweat ran thick she wrapped her in felt and breathed her; she cut her feed, timed her water; she melted the fat from the aged body and laid down sinew like a bow in its place. Forty days passed thus; at the end of forty nights an old light kindled in the aged horse's eye — the light of the one who is a tulpar among the herd, whose hooves do not touch the earth when she runs. When Kanıkey saw that light she laid her brow against the horse's brow, and for the first time, the first time in twelve years, a bird of hope rose within her.

✦ ✦ ✦

As the day of the race drew near, Kanıkey opened the mouths of the chests. The trusts left from Manas had lain twelve years wrapped in felts; one by one she drew them out, one by one she kissed them, one by one she girded them on. The sword Zulpukor, found from the unseen world, came to her waist; the arrow-proof fine cloak came to her back; the heaven-sent Boz kise came under her arm. She bound Almambet's musket Sırbarañ to the crupper, took the enchanted lance in her hand, set the grey-blue helmet on her head. She looked not into the mirror but at her shadow: the shadow was the shadow of a warrior.

She went to the bedside of Çıyırdı, ninety-five years old, and kissed her hand.

— Mother, she said, give me your blessing. It is I who will ride your son's horse in the race; it is I who will carry your son's trust.

Çıyırdı laid her withered hands on her daughter-in-law's head.

— Go, Kanıkey, she said. My milk be lawful to you. May the spirit of Manas walk before you, may Kıdır be your companion. You are not a bride but the pillar of this hearth; if the pillar bends, the house falls — do not bend.

When Kanıkey entered Buhara in a warrior's garb, the square filled to overflowing. The crowd, seeing the face beneath the grey-blue helmet and the bearing within the fine cloak, surged like a wave; old men nudged one another, and some raised a hand to their mouths.

— Manas! someone whispered. Han Manas has risen!

— Hush, they said, do the dead rise?

But the trembling spread; as the figure on horseback crossed the square, thousands of eyes followed it, and thousands of hearts for one moment remembered Talas. Yet the city's gossiping mouth did not stay idle. Shadows were recognised, curtains were drawn aside; in the bazaar, in the bathhouse, at the doorsteps, word was strung to word:

— Have you heard? The widow woman means to run her single aged horse. Into six hundred thoroughbreds she means to throw forty-year-old Taytoru. Do not laugh — by God, it is so.

The word reached Temir Han's ear as well. The khan came himself to his daughter's palace; he took the hand of Kanıkey, who met him at the gate, and spoke as one pleading.

— Daughter, he said, do not blacken my white face. In my stable are four thoroughbreds; Aktulpar at their head, all four children of the wind. I will lay all four before you: mount whichever you will, and whichever wins, the first prize is yours. Only do not run this one aged horse and fall upon the tongues of strangers.

Kanıkey kissed her father's hand but did not bow her head.

— Father, she said, may you live long and well. But this horse is not a racing horse; she is a horse of omen. I am not racing for the prize; I am racing for fate. The words of those who say "the widow woman" have become a mountain on my heart; either this horse melts that mountain, or I am buried beneath it. Let Aktulpar be yours; my horse is Taytoru.

And she ordered the race herself. She summoned the scribe Moldosan; Moldosan opened his inkwell, cut his reed pen, and wrote the incoming horses one by one into the register. The thoroughbreds of the eight khans were written, the horses of beys, of heroes, of rich men were written; at the register's end the count came to exactly six hundred and forty-three. Among six hundred and forty-three thoroughbreds there was one single aged horse, and all Buhara was laughing at her.

The one who would lead the horses to the starting ground was the old man Eşen. Kanıkey drew him aside and laid out her words before him like a map of the road:

— Listen, white-beard. You will loose the horses from the starting ground at Kara-Deñiz. The road passes through the waterless desert of Ak-Çiy; from there it comes to İt-Ölör — the name says it: there the dog dies, there the man faints. You will find water here, you will find shade here; you will take the horses over this ridge and keep them off this sand. And swear me an oath: if you deal falsely, if you hold back one man's horse and loose another's, I will take your head. I will not spare your white beard — swear.

The old man Eşen went pale with fear and swore:

— May bread strike me and salt seize me; if I deal falsely, my head is yours.

Meanwhile the poison of the gossip was dripping onto another hearth. Ismayıl had taken to heart all that he heard in the bazaar; the words "the widow woman" had touched his honour too. He shut himself in and drank, and the more he drank the darker he grew. One evening he called the twelve-year-old Semetey to him. The boy came and sat at his knee; the child who knew his own mother as his sister, who did not know his own blood.

— Son, said Ismayıl, I have a command for you; if you are a man, you will keep it. Your sister Kanıkey has thrown her aged horse in among six hundred thoroughbreds; we have fallen upon the tongues of strangers, we have become the world's laughing-stock. On the day of the race, hold the road with your men. If Taytoru comes in front, well and good. But if she falls behind, if she comes at the tail of the herd — seize your sister on the road and cut her throat as one cuts a sacrifice. That is the day our honour shall be washed in blood.

Semetey raised his head and looked; something twisted within him, but he could not put a name to it. His sister's face rose before his eyes: the hand that held out fruit to him, the palm laid on his brow when his fever rose, the gaze that trembled over him from afar. To cut the throat — of that woman? But a command was a command, a father's word a father's word; the boy was silent, made no sound, went out. That night he could not sleep; nor did he know why he could not sleep. From where he lay he stared at the ceiling; and on the ceiling, snowy mountains he had never seen appeared and vanished.

✦ ✦ ✦

On the day of the race, before dawn broke, six hundred and forty-three thoroughbreds neighed on the shore of Kara-Deñiz; the old man Eşen raised his hand, brought it down, and earth and sky became dust. The horses plunged into the waterless desert of Ak-Çiy; the burning sand of İt-Ölör swallowed the sound of their hooves.

On the Buhara side, on the crest of a high hill, Kanıkey stood alone. In her hand was the great spyglass that Bakay had taken from sixty Orus and given to Manas as a gift, and that Bölökbay had worked upon for seven years. Kanıkey pressed the spyglass to her breast and swore an oath:

— Six times I will look. If in six lookings Taytoru does not appear, I will drive the dagger Aktinte into my own breast. Either the horse comes, or the soul goes.

She looked the first time: she saw dust, and nothing but dust. She looked the second time: she saw the leading horses, saw the white mane of Aktulpar; Taytoru she did not see. She looked the third time: she saw the middle of the field, saw its tail; her heart tightened, her knees seemed to loosen. The hilt of Aktinte grew damp in her palm. — Three lookings remain, she said to herself; her voice came strange to her own ear. — O my departed khan, I was your wife, I was your companion; twelve years I have raised your son at a stranger's door. Do not leave me fallen today.

At the fourth looking she made out a shape within the dust: it was threading up from three-hundredth place, neck outstretched, its aged body coming young again. And Kanıkey's eye saw what no mortal eye can see. Taytoru was not alone. On Sarala, Almambet had come up and was pulling at the horse's right side; on Kökala, Çubak was at her left. Er Sırgak was giving her wings from behind, Acıbay and Bakay were opening the road. And at the very front, on a tulpar made of dust, a figure in a grey-blue helmet was turning to look back:

— My kinswoman's horse, the very spirit of Manas was saying, let my kinswoman's horse not fall behind!

As the spirits of the martyred companions pulled the horse, Taytoru opened out; she came to fiftieth place, came to fortieth, came to tenth. But in front was Aktulpar, Aktulpar the child of the wind; and the gap would not close.

Then Kanıkey unbound the Sırbarañ from the crupper. The musket, unfired for twelve years and eaten with rust, she had been filing and cleaning for days, and had oiled;

now she primed the barrel with dry powder, aimed at the sky, and pulled the trigger. It was as if the heavens split; the plain of Buhara roared.

Taytoru knew that sound. She had run beneath that sound in the campaign when Koşoy rescued Bilerik; that sound was to her as feed, as water, as the whip. At the first thunderclap she shot forward like an arrow, at the second she closed the gap, at the third she drew level with Aktulpar's flank. As Kanıkey fired, the horse opened out; at the fourth thunderclap, Taytoru of the sixty noble bloodlines left Temir Han's child of the wind behind and took the lead.

At that same hour, something came over Semetey where he waited holding the road. Afterwards they would say that in that hour Kıdır touched the boy's shoulder. He touched him — and words that had not entered his tongue in twelve years rose up from within him like a boiling spring: Manas — who is Manas? Talas — where is Talas? Kırgız — what is Kırgız? Mother — who is mother? The words came, their meanings did not; but the boy's chest widened, his eye saw far, his heart began to beat like a drum. He turned to the champions beside him; Ismayıl's bloody command came to the tip of his tongue and died there.

— Warriors, said Semetey, I offer you another oath. You know my father's command; I will not keep that command. To cut a woman's throat is no work for a man — least of all a stout-hearted woman who has entered a horse in the race. Bring white wheat, bring the Holy Word. Let our oath be this: if Taytoru appears, we will ride out before her, we will raise the war-cry "Manas!" and drive the horse all the way to Buhara; and of the prize we will not take a single coin. Whoever will not enter this oath, let him leave our company.

The champions looked at one another; they looked at the fire in the boy's eye, and there was not one who did not enter. They chewed the white wheat, laid their hands on the Holy Word, and swore.

Not long after, dust appeared on the horizon. Out of the dust stretched first a head, then a neck, then a body aged but winged: at the very front of six hundred and forty-three thoroughbreds came Taytoru; Aktulpar behind her, the field farther behind still. Semetey came down from the bluff with a battle-roar:

— Manas!

The cry struck the valley and spread from the valley across the plain. The boy seized Taytoru's halter, laid the whip to his own horse's flank, and drove for Buhara; the sixty champions swept after him, all crying with one mouth:

— Manas! Manas!

The plain heard it, and the reaper on the plain lifted his sickle to the sky and joined in; the grain was left standing, the threshing-floor abandoned. The mountain heard it, and the shepherd on the mountain dropped his pipe and shouted; the flock scattered by itself, and no one turned to look. The caravan halted, the mill halted; the women at the waterside, the sentries on the fortress towers, the students in the medrese — the whole world surged with a single war-cry: Manas! Manas! It was as if the departed khan had risen, had come down from the Ala-Too and was riding across the plain of Buhara. The old Kırgız exiles wept together at the roadside; and a saying passed about, none knowing from whose mouth it had first come: the orphan has grown; the seed is waking.

On the hilltop, Kanıkey, seeing her son seize the horse's halter, lowered the spyglass. There was no need for the sixth looking. She pushed Aktinte back into its sheath and lifted her face to the sky; she neither laughed nor wept — she did both at once. Then she turned her horse's head and, seen by no one, silent as she had come, withdrew to her palace. The omen had fallen; the rest belonged to her son.

In the square the prizes were heaped up like a mountain: a thousand dark-brown camels, a thousand mares, seven houses full of treasure. Temir Han's viziers drew Semetey forward: take it, it is yours; you took it in the name of the horse's owner. Semetey gave the heap a single glance, then turned to his champions.

— What was our oath? he said. We were to take not a single coin. Divide the camels from here, the mares from there; pour the treasure out into the midst. Let every man take according to his labour; I will not take half a coin.

And so he did: the thousand dark-brown camels, the thousand mares, the seven houses of treasure he divided down to the last scrap of halter; for himself he set aside not so much as a whip-handle. The champions who took their shares could not believe it at first; then they knelt before the boy; and the eldest among them stroked his whitening moustache and leaned to the man beside him: — I know this hand from somewhere, he said. This hand is the seed of the hand that dealt out homelands to forty companions in Talas; I have not sworn it, yet it is as if I had. The eight khans, seeing this, looked at one another; if a twelve-year-old boy's hand was so open, his eye so easily filled, what would that hand not grasp

tomorrow, what would that eye not hunger for? In wonder mixed with fear they decided — or found the decision already made for them: to crown the boy with a golden crown and raise him to the throne, to bind the flooding water into a visible channel. The eight khans took hold from eight sides, set the golden crown on Semetey, and seated him on the golden throne. Drums were beaten, proclamations were cried: the twelve-year-old orphan had become khan of Buhara. Temir Han gave a feast of three days and three nights, and in the midst of the feast he rose and declared to all the guests: this boy is the son of my son Ismayıl; he is my own grandson.

A feast, as they say, is no feast without wrestling. Into the square came Töötbalban of Kokon: a man like a camel, his neck a bull's neck, his palm a shovel. He grappled with the Akbalban of Buhara; one day they held, two days they held, three days and three nights they held. At the end of the sixth day Töötbalban lifted Akbalban and dashed him to the ground; the earth groaned, and Buhara's face was brought down to the dust. The man of Kokon was not content with winning; he plundered the prizes laid out, armful upon armful, and then stretched himself in the square and boasted:

— Is there no man in Buhara? If there is, let him come out!

On the golden throne, Semetey's eyes went dark. He tore the crown from his head, stripped off his robe of honour, and strode into the square. Ismayıl ran and barred his way:

— Son, stop! You are a child, you will be crushed; do not disgrace the city twice!

Semetey did not stop. Ismayıl, who barred his way — the man he knew as his father — he felled like a log with one blow of his shoulder, and entered the square. Töötbalban laughed when he saw the boy; his laughter broke off halfway. Semetey seized the champion's outstretched wrist in both hands and squeezed; the bones crumpled like paper. Töötbalban sank down bellowing; the boy did not release the fallen man, but tore his arm from the shoulder, from its very root. The champion of Kokon gave up his life there, in the middle of the square. The square turned to stone; not one cheer, not one breath. Only Semetey's own breathing was heard, and the dull sound of the arm striking the ground.

✦ ✦ ✦

That night the eight khans shut themselves in one tent; they drank no kımız, took no sleep, spoke in whispers. The eldest began:

— Did you see the boy? He who fells a camel at twelve will fell us at fifteen. Today we raised him to a throne before us; tomorrow he climbs onto ours. If this fire is not put out while it is small, it will lick through all our homelands.

— True, said another, but the hand raised openly against him withers; Temir Han will not give up his grandson, and the people will stand by the boy. Cunning is needed — cunning dressed in wedding clothes.

And there they wove the black design: they would ask for the boy as a white-tent bridegroom for Margalañ; at the feast to be held in the bride's house they would stir poison into the boza vat; when Semetey fell drunk they would cut off his head; and the head they would carry to Talas, to Abıke and Köböş, as glad tidings, and take their reward from the two villains. The next day they sent their honey-tongued orators to Temir Han. The orators bowed and poured forth:

— Our khan, we have found for your fortunate grandson a girl of Margalañ fair as a houri; her lineage high, her dowry heavy. Let him be a white-tent bridegroom, let two homelands be bound by kinship; let the feast be held in the bride's house — such is the custom.

Simple-hearted Temir Han was taken in by the polish of the words and did not see the poison beneath; he stroked his beard and gave his consent. The very day was fixed, and the betrothal bundles were set in preparation. Treachery waited patiently at the bottom of the boza vat.

When the orators returned with the good news, the eight khans raised their cups; but one among them — the youngest, the sharpest-eyed — left his cup half-raised:

— There is one thing you have not reckoned, he said. On the day of the race, did you hear the war-cry? Manas, they cried. In the dust of six hundred and forty-three horses, the name of a dead khan came alive. Where the name comes alive, the seed comes alive too. Make haste; let this business be finished before the boza ferments.

A chill came down upon the tent; no one answered, and everyone understood.

In those same days, in another palace, Çıyırdı — ninety-five years old, who had not risen from her bed in twelve years — had begun to murmur in the nights. One morning she took Kanıkey's hand and pressed it with her dry fingers:

— My daughter, she said, the light of my eyes is going; only the rust of my ears remains. At the race I heard a war-cry: Manas, they cried. Once, only once, let me see my

grandson's face; let me breathe the scent of my Manas, and then let me die. Do not leave this wish of mine unanswered.

Kanıkey pressed her mother-in-law's hand to her face, and went out. The next morning she had word that Semetey was riding out to fly his hawk; his speckled falcon perched on his arm, he was passing out of the city gate with two horsemen. Kanıkey barred his road. The boy reined in his horse and knit his brows; he knew the woman before him as his sister, and did not greatly love her — for every time he looked into this woman's face, an ache he could not name woke within him.

— Give way, sister, he said. My bird frets, my quarry is escaping.

— It will not escape, little brother, said Kanıkey. She mastered the tremor in her voice and spoke as one pleading: — I have one wish; do not leave it unanswered. In my house lies a mother of ninety-five; for twelve years she has not risen from her bed, and her two eyes are two fountains. Before she dies she wishes to look on a warrior's face; and you are now the khan of this land, and khanship means granting wishes and asking nothing in return. Come to my palace, drink one bowl of my kımız, take that mother's blessing; her blessing is sharper than a sword.

Semetey fought a brief war with the ache inside him; then he gave his falcon to his groom and turned his horse's head. Kanıkey brought her son into her white palace with its iron gates. Within, seventy kinds of food were laid out: honey, cream, kurut, meats from the tandır, boorsok heaped like a mountain; kımız foamed in silver bowls. The boy ate, drank, softened. Kanıkey sat down opposite him and opened the talk — not of herself, but of far places.

— Let me tell you a tale, little brother, she said. Once upon a time in the Kırgız land there was a lady called Kardıgaç, and a warrior maiden called Kız Saykal. When Konurbay of the Kalmak fell upon the homeland, the men had been cut down and the field stood empty. Kardıgaç gathered her hair up into her cap, Saykal buckled on her armour; two women met Konurbay's vanguard at the mouth of the pass. Three days and three nights they fought; they say Saykal's lance pierced Konurbay's shield and put him to flight. Afterwards they made a song of it: manhood is the work of the heart, they sang, not the work of the beard.

As Semetey listened, the drum within him began to beat again; he was hearing the name Konurbay for the first time, yet at the sound of it his teeth clenched and his hands became fists.

— And what happened then, sister? he asked. Were the men of that land all cut down? To whom was their homeland left?

— Their homeland still stands, said Kanıkey softly. Talas, they call it — its water honey, its grass cream; Ala-Too, they call it — its snow silver. Perhaps one day your road will lead there.

— Talas... said Semetey. He turned the word over in his mouth, tasted it. — Strange. I have never heard this name, and yet it is as if I knew it from somewhere. Kanıkey saw this, and her heart filled with joy and fear together; she said no more, but rose and drew aside the curtain of the inner room.

— Come, she said, let me make you known to a mother. Mother, here is the warrior I spoke of — he counts as your young kinsman; kiss him and breathe his scent.

Çıyırdı, within her bed, strove to rise; the body that had not risen in twelve years stood up, though bent double. Her dry hands groped the air and found the boy's face; brow, eyebrow, chin — she traced them one by one. Then the old mother drew in the boy's scent, and a hoarse sob broke from her breast.

— His scent... she said. His scent is his scent...

— Our mother is old, little brother, said Kanıkey quickly; she finds her dead son in every warrior. Do not be troubled; come, I will show you something.

They passed into the chamber of the chests. Kanıkey lifted the lid, unwound the felts, and drew out the trusts one by one. First she took the marten-fur cap and set it on the boy's head. Then she held up the fine coat: the arrow-proof coat that she had softened with her own teeth through seven years of nights, into whose every stitch oath and tears were worked. She laid it on Semetey's shoulders; the coat sat as if made to his measure. She dressed him in the kandagay breeches; she drew onto his feet the leather boots, gold of heel, worked with rubies.

— These, said Kanıkey, once bore the back, the head, and the feet of a great warrior. I wondered whether they would become you; forgive me, little brother.

Semetey stepped before the mirror — and something in the room changed. Afterwards Kanıkey would say to herself what she said to no one: in that moment a spirit settled upon the coat's shoulders; the boy's neck seemed to thicken, his gaze grew heavy, a mountain settled into his bearing. The image in the mirror was not the image of a twelve-year-old boy; it was Han Manas himself, lacking only his grey-blue helmet, lacking his Akkula, lacking

his forty companions. Çıyırdı must have seen it from her bed, for she buried her face in the pillow and wept without a sound. Semetey looked at himself in the mirror and was a stranger to himself; in his breast those unknown words stirred again: Manas. Talas. Mother.

— Sister, he said in a choked voice, who was the warrior of these garments?

Kanıkey's tongue cleaved to her palate. The word, the word of twelve years, came all the way to the back of her teeth; and there it stopped. It was not yet time. The treachery of the eight khans stood at the door, the Margalañ road was a snare, one wrong word would cost the orphan his head. She swallowed, and smiled:

— Old things, little brother. Do not ask now; when the time comes, this chest will find its tongue, and so will I.

Semetey made to take off the trusts; his hand would not obey. The coat seemed unwilling to leave his back, the boots his feet. In the end he mounted his horse just so, in those garments; as he rode in through the city gate, those who saw him lined the roadside and fell silent, and some bowed without willing it. The boy khan could not sleep in his palace that night; in his dream he saw snowy mountains whose name he did not know, and beyond the mountains the blue of a lake, and on the lake's shore a white-bearded warrior whose face could not be made out. The warrior was pointing with his hand toward the distance, toward the sunset.

At that same hour Kanıkey stood alone on the roof of her palace, her face turned toward Talas. Since evening she had had word that the marriage envoys had set out from Margalañ; she did not yet know of the poison at the bottom of the boza vat, but her heart sensed something, and beat against her ribs. She looked at the stars and whispered as one swearing an oath:

— Twelve years I have waited; I can wait one more night. But the time is narrowing now, Manas. Either I open the secret this night, or tomorrow night the secret strangles us.

And that long night came down upon Buhara like a trial.

CHAPTER 15

The Secret of the Bloodline and Kanikey's Long Night

— ❖ —

That year an early autumn had settled over Buhara; poplar leaves drifted down into the palace pools, and caravan bells swayed with a muffled tolling at the foot of the walls. The boy of twelve believed he knew his name, but he did not know his lineage. They called him Semetey; they called him the grandson of Temir Han; they called him a khan's orphan, raised without a mother, bereft of a father. Yet the boy's wrist had outgrown his years; when he wrestled, the young men of Buhara went down on their backs, and when he loosed an arrow, he struck the flying goose through the eye. The palace tutors whispered to one another: there is something apart in this child, they said; he has drunk from another spring, his clay was kneaded from another soil. Whose spring, whose soil — no one asked; and whoever asked would have had his tongue cut with an adze. There was always a woman at his side, a woman of grave countenance and measured speech, who carried an unresting shadow in the depths of her eyes; the boy called her elder sister. She whom he called sister

was his own mother, Kanıkey; but the veil had not yet been torn, the secret still lay beneath the stone.

That morning Kanıkey woke the boy early. In her hands was an old sash; grey in color, its gold embroidery faded, yet a sash that warmed the palm of whoever held it. She wound it three times about the boy's waist, knotted it three times, and three times read a prayer over it in silence.

— This is the Boz kise, she said. It came down from a dervish near Mecca; and the dervish held it to have descended from heaven. Whoever girds it, no bullet shall pierce him; whoever girds it, his road shall lie open. Today you will go down to the bazaar of Buhara; but open your ears, and write my words upon your heart. The Sarts of Kokon, of Altı-Şaar, of Andican and Margalañ have tied a knot against you. Within thirteen days they mean to lure you as a guest of the white house and take you hostage, to feast you on poisoned boza and never let you see the light of day again. Do not drink what they offer; do not sit where they bid you sit. The Kuşbegi's men have tongues of honey, and beneath the honeyed tongue lies venom.

— Sister, said the boy, who am I, and whose, that a Sart should tie a knot against me?

A cloud passed over Kanıkey's face; it passed and was gone, and in its place that stone calm settled once more.

— You are a khan's grandson, she said. Ask no further. Go now, go safely, and return unharmed.

The boy mounted his horse and rode out onto the steppe. The road was long, the day was mild. Behind a hill, in the very middle of the road, stood an old man mounted on a blue ox. He looked to be ninety at least; his beard fell to his chest, his cloak was blue, and his eyes were as clear as the eyes of a child. The ox did not stir, and the old man was smiling.

— Is it the road you want, young hero, he said, or the truth of the road?

— If there is one who can give both, I will take both, said Semetey.

The old man took off his blue cloak and threw it over the boy's shoulders; he laid his palm on the boy's head and read a long prayer. Then he raised his finger and counted, not toward the sky, but toward the past:

— Listen. From Böyön Han was born Karakan, and from Karakan's loins, generation upon generation, came Cakıp, and from Cakıp was born a lion whose name is Manas. The

rest the road will tell you, the charcoal will tell you, the mother will tell you. Go now, lion's cub; what is born of the wolf becomes a wolf.

Semetey turned to ask something more; there was neither blue ox nor old man. In the middle of the steppe there was only the wind, and a scent of roses drifting to his nostrils from no source that could be known. Those who learned of it later understood: the dervish on the blue ox was Kıdır, companion of those in distress — Hızır himself, and no other.

In Buhara matters had been knotted just as Kanıkey had said. In the Kuşbegi's mansion the tables had been laid, carpets spread across the threshold of the white house, jars of boza set out in rows; at the bottom of the jars lay poison, and at the bottom of the smiles, a knife. Semetey stepped over the threshold and did not sit at the table. His eye caught on two things hanging on the wall: the Akbarañ musket brought as a gift for Temir Han, and the zulfiqar sword in its gold-worked sheath. In one lunge the boy seized them both; and having seized them, he took his stand at the door.

— If this is your hospitality, he said, let me show you mine.

Sixty wrestlers came at him; all sixty were the chosen champions of the Sart, each could seize a camel and bring it to its knees, their arms knotted like the boughs of an oak. The first to come saw the flash of the zulfiqar and was gone before he had seen it; the second dissolved into the smoke of the Akbarañ. Then the third, the fifth, the tenth, and the courtyard narrowed and the screaming grew; some leapt from the roofs, some piled one upon another at the threshold. The twelve-year-old boy wheeled in the middle of the courtyard like a sun; whoever looked at him was dazzled. All sixty were left on the ground. The Akbarañ thundered, the zulfiqar rose and fell like lightning; the pillars of the white house shook, the boza jars toppled, the poisoned drink spilled onto the earth, and even the earth heaved and foamed at it. The Kuşbegi's knot had come undone, his snare had closed upon his own head. Returning, Semetey loaded plunder onto eighty mules and brought it all and poured it out at the feet of the woman he called sister.

— Take it, sister, he said; had it not been for your prayer, I would have drunk the poison in the jar this day.

Kanıkey did not look at the plunder; she looked into the boy's face, looked long, seemed about to say something, and did not say it. But fate had already written what she would have said upon the tongue of a charcoal-burner.

To the east of Buhara there was a forest they called Kül-Tokoy; a forest forbidden to enter, whose name was not taken upon the tongue. One day, while Semetey was out hunting, a bird dropped into his path; whether it was a pheasant or something else, its feathers shifted through seven colors wherever the sun struck them. The bird fled, the boy gave chase; the bird glided on, the boy plunged after; and suddenly he found himself in the heart of the forbidden forest, beside a soot-blackened hearth. Whether the bird was Hızır or a pheasant, God alone knows; but it had brought the boy where he was meant to be brought.

The forest was dim within; the air held the smell of burnt logs, the smell of soot, and the smell of old wounds besides. At the hearth sat a one-eyed man; his face was soot, his hands were callus, his back was bent. They called him Sarı Taz; he was the own brother of Kölöy Han, who had fought seven years for the khanate of Buhara and been defeated, and from that day to this he lived in grief, paying Temir Han eighty camel-loads of charcoal every month. When he saw Semetey his single eye widened, his tongue seized, and he turned his back.

— Who are you, said Semetey, and what do you seek in this forbidden place?

Sarı Taz was silent. He asked again; again silence. At the third asking the boy's patience overflowed and his whip rose; when the whip came down across the old man's back, the seal upon his tongue was broken. He straightened, fixed his single eye upon the boy, and cried out, stone upon stone, as though pouring forth a wound:

— Strike, khan's orphan, strike! For one who does not know his own lineage, even the whip is too little! Your father is Manas, Manas the khan of khans! She whom you call sister, Kanıkey, is your own mother! Your homeland is Talas, Talas in the bosom of the Ala-Too! Your betrothed is Ayçürök, daughter of Akun Han! While you have grown at a stranger's door in Buhara, your father in Talas can find no rest in his grave!

Had lightning struck Semetey, it could not have struck harder. The whip fell from his hand; the world spun before his eyes. He did not know how he mounted his horse; when he took the road to Buhara, only two words were spilling from his lips, two words that had cloven the boy's whole life in two:

— Manas! Talas! Manas! Talas!

When Temir Han heard that his grandson had returned, he ordered festivities; he sent out a hundred maidens and a hundred brides to meet him, and had silk spread upon the

roads. Semetey gave no glance to the hundred maidens nor to the hundred brides; he did not tread upon the silks, he spoke with no one. He went to the foot of the watchtower, made a pillow of his Akkañkı saddle, turned his face toward the qibla, and lay down. He lay a day, he lay three days, he lay twelve days; he did not eat, he did not drink, he did not speak a word. Temir Han came and pleaded; grandmother Altınay came and wept; the boy had turned to stone. The tower's shadow shortened in the morning and lengthened at evening, passing over the boy like a sundial. The palace folk watched from afar and whispered: some said a jinn had struck him, some said the evil eye had touched him. Kanıkey alone knew what had struck him; but Kanıkey's feet would not carry her toward him, for a mother's heart knew: to go to the foot of that stone was to break a vow of twelve years.

On the twelfth day Kişimcan passed that way; she was an embittered woman, and her tongue was sharp.

— Lie there, she said, lie, khan's orphan! He whose father lies in Talas will lie in Buhara, no doubt!

After her came Kölöy Han; he was a blunt man, and did not bend his words:

— My brother Sarı Taz told you no lie, he said. You are the son of Manas. Everyone here knows it; you alone did not.

Then Semetey rose to his feet. The hunger of twelve days set his legs trembling; he took up his moon-axe and, leaning upon it, step by step, walked to Kanıkey's house. He opened the door and gripped the threshold. Kanıkey drew back into the corner; she drew back, but she did not flee. Mother and son met each other's eyes; the veil of twelve years was torn there, upon that threshold.

— Speak, said Semetey. Who are you? Who am I? Let me hear it once from your own mouth.

Kanıkey's grave face gave way; it cracked as stone cracks, and from within it a lament of twelve years broke loose.

— I am not your sister, my child, I am your own mother! Your father was Manas; the lion of the Ala-Too, the khan of the Kırgız, Manas! When he died the world fell in upon our heads. The six accursed — Abıke and Köböş, Çıybıt and Koçkor, Adıbay and Kölbay — divided your father's goods by the whip's measure; because I stood against them they struck me on the breast, they raised the whip over the white milk I had given. They would have strangled you in the cradle, my child. So one winter night I wrapped you against my

bosom, I tucked father Bakay's letter into my breast, I mounted the two swift horses he gave, and I fled. The Sır-Derya had frozen; the ice now held, now broke; I crossed that water forty-two times, and forty-two times I pressed you to my breast and said, let me die — and could not die. I took refuge with my father Temir Han; I hid your name, I hid your lineage, I guarded you from the eyes of strangers. And if I hid it, it was not from fear of you — it was because I could not bear your loss!

When Kanıkey had finished, she opened her hands and showed her son her palms; on those palms was written the script of whip-scars, of ice-cracks, of twelve years of silence.

— Strike me if you will, she said. Strike me for deceiving you; but know that my deceit was to keep you alive. Every day you called me sister, I bled within; each time you said sister, I said, within myself, my child — and no one heard.

Semetey laid his moon-axe on the ground. His knees gave way; whether from the hunger of twelve days or the orphanhood of twelve years, none can say — and he fell at his mother's knee. The mother took her son's head into her lap; the lullaby delayed twelve years she sang now in the mode of a lament, low in voice, high in heart. That night in the palace of Buhara two people wept until morning: one an orphan who had found his mother, one a mother restored to her son. Toward dawn the boy slept; in his dream he saw a white-bearded, majestic warrior standing beside a grey horse, saying nothing, smiling. When he woke, his pillow was wet, and in his heart was an ache whose name he had learned that very day: the ache of a father.

✦ ✦ ✦

The next day Semetey's eyes no longer saw Buhara, nor Temir Han's palace. One word alone was on his tongue:

— I will go to my father's grave. I will read the Qur'an at its head. I will go to Talas.

At first Temir Han would not consent; he recited every reason — that his grandson was still a child, that the road was far, that the enemies were many. But grandmother Altınay stood firm; she planted herself before her husband and showed him her white hair:

— You cannot tether a lion's cub as though it were a lamb, she said. If you tether him, he will snap the rope — and you with it.

That day, when Semetey came before his grandfather, the Boz kise was at his waist, a lynx pelt on his back, a sable cap upon his head. When Temir Han saw his grandson so, his tongue failed him; it was as though dead Manas had risen and stood before him. The old khan's eyes filled; he gave the command, and they brought Aktulpar — a tulpar of the line of that blessed courser Kanıkey had once demanded of her father at the risk of estrangement forever, full-maned, deep-flanked, fire-eyed. He set the arrow-proof Gök Küpü caftan on his grandson's shoulders and put the grey short-barreled musket in his hand.

— Take these, he said, and let me send with you hundreds of chosen soldiers besides, that no one on the Talas road may set tooth upon you.

Semetey raised his head; on the shoulders of twelve years lay the weight of forty.

— My thanks, grandfather, he said. I have taken your horse, I have put on your caftan, I have girded your musket. But your soldiers I will not take. Shall I drive your army against my own Kırgız? He who brings foreign troops upon his homeland in the eyes of the people goes not to claim his country but to strike it. I go not to war; I go to read the Qur'an over my father.

Temir Han did not speak again. With aged eyes he looked at his grandson; and in that look there was pride, and there was farewell.

At the gate Kanıkey was waiting. She was weeping, but even as she wept her mind was in order; a mother's heart had become a map of the road, and she had learned by heart every stone, every water, every pass. She took hold of her son's rein and counted it out step by step:

— When you leave here you will come onto the Ak-Çiy steppe; six days and six nights you will ride, scant of water, rich in stars. On the seventh day you will reach Kül-Tokoy; when I fled with you at my breast, I rested in that forest — its trees know me. From there you will cross Boz-Böltök. Do not turn aside into Kokon, my child; there too they will set the snare of poisoned boza for you — the Sart's grudge is long. Keep Kokon on your right and make for the Aman-Col pass. When you descend the pass, the Sır-Derya will rise before you; I crossed that water forty-two times, you will cross it once — give the water its due blessing. Then comes the valley of Çıyırçık, where the tombs of the saints stand; turn aside and read a Fatiha. You will pass through the Salar valleys and come to Oluya-Ata. From there the Corgo pass, then Cılgınduu, then Keñ-Kol... Whoever has seen Keñ-Kol has seen Talas, my child. Wide Talas will spread itself before you; your father's homeland, and yours.

She drew a breath, and clasped her son's hand:

— On the road two trusts await you. One is Kumayık, your father's blessed hunting hound. They found him in the Mediyan desert, at Kum-Bulak; a blind whelp fallen from the nest of a grey vulture — whether dog or bird, none could tell. Your father gave eighty camel-loads of gold and asked for me, that a sinless woman might raise the blessed whelp; I was then a girl of fourteen. It was I who suckled the blind whelp with my own tongue, my child; I gave him morsels from my mouth and milk from my tongue. I had a pit dug and set the whelp within it, and posted forty archers at its head; by night came the wolf, by day came the bird, and forty arrows turned back all forty. Kumayık grew; he became a hound with pricked ears, broad chest, and eyes of fire, who could catch the scent of a trail seven days old and take the fleeing deer by its shadow. For twelve years Kumayık has counted the days; he knows the year of your coming, and he waits for you upon the road. The other is Akşumkar, your father's falcon. When your father died he tore his golden jess and flew away; five years he wandered Jerusalem and Baghdad, seven years Mecca and Medina. In the twelfth year he returned; now he has made a nest with a swan above Çatır-Köl. Take him with his young, and carry him in your feed-bag; he is your winged inheritance from your father.

Kanıkey paused. What she had to say sat in her throat like a stone; she swallowed, and brought the stone forth:

— Now I will give you my heaviest secret, my child. How your father died, and where he lies — I alone know it, I and God. There had been the great campaign against Beecin; on the homeward road, at Çatkal, your father had stood to the afternoon prayer. A man at prayer is not to be struck; but what has Konurbay to do with faith, what has he to do with religion? He came from behind and drove his lance into the back of the man at prayer. With that wound your father came as far as Keñ-Şor; at Keñ-Şor he gave up his soul. I died that day, my child; I died, yet could not be buried, for I had work to do. I feared the traitors would not leave even your father's bones in peace. At Eçkilik I had five masters hollow out the rock of Kara-Too; I furnished its inside with ruby lamps, I had a golden bedstead set within. We buried your father there one night, unseen by any. And then... then I gave those five masters poison to drink, my child. All five were masters of forty years' craft, all five were their mothers' lambs; I poisoned them that the secret might be kept. That sin is on my neck; I shall answer for it at the Last Judgment. And for the people's eyes I raised a false mausoleum of seven hundred camel-loads of clay; within it I had the whole epic of the

Beecin war engraved — Akkula's running, Almambet's turning back, the khan's last battle. When you come to that mausoleum, set your ear to its dome: if the dome thunders, the road is open — your father has received you.

Semetey's face was white as lime; but his eyes were dry, and in place of tears there was fire within him.

— What awaits me in Talas, mother?

— In Talas a broken world awaits you, said Kanıkey. Your father Bakay — your father's counselor-father, wise Bakay — has been branded a bandit by the traitors; for twelve years he has herded camels at Beş-Taş, and all the world laughs at his blessed Kök tulpar, calling it the Grey Dock-tail. Your father's black bull-camel Celmayan, ninety-five years old, has mourned for twelve years; he drags his neck along the ground and sheds tears from his eyes; when you arrive you will offer him in sacrifice, and his mourning will end. And if you ask who is at the head of the sedition, I will tell you though my heart is torn: it is your own great-grandfather Cakıp, my child; they have come to call him the swine-khan — he shut his eyes to his grandson's death, and now he holds bride-taking rites and lives at his pleasure. Burulça, the widow of your uncle Almambet, has been driven down to herding cattle, and waits behind the herds of strangers. The lame master Bölökbay — the smith who forged your father's weapons — has fled to the mountains with his forty companions, and his lair is unknown. Such is the state of Talas, my child. If you go, it is to this that you go.

Semetey gripped his horse's mane; his voice was low, but the steppe heard it:

— I swear it, mother. If I do not wipe away the brand from my father Bakay, if I do not still Celmayan's mourning, if I do not dry Burulça's tears, if I do not mend that broken world — let them never call me son of Manas.

✦ ✦ ✦

That night no one in Buhara slept; but the longest night was Kanıkey's. The mother sat by the hearth and drew her son down at her knee; one by one she opened all the doors of the twelve years. For the road is not enough for a young man setting out; he needs companions, he needs weapons, he needs the past.

— First let me tell you your companions, she said. In Talas there are two lion cubs; one will stand at your right, one at your left. At your right is Külçoro, son of your uncle Almambet. His mother was Aruuke; she carried that child in her womb six years, my child, six years! When he was born his fist was clenched; they opened it, and within it was black blood. Those who knew said: this child was born with the enemy's blood, he has brought vengeance in his fist. When Aruuke died, Burulça raised him. The six accursed gave him no peace either; they beat him, stripped him naked and drove him out into the winter. That orphan is now a young man, and your name is written in his heart. At your left is Kançoro, son of your uncle Çubak; Kambar raised him. He is valiant, his wrist is stone; but I will say one word to you — hang it in your ear like an earring: one side of his heart is dark, my child. Whence the darkness comes I do not know; perhaps from orphanhood, perhaps from the leaven. Love him, keep him at your side, but never give him your back entirely.

In the hearth a log collapsed; sparks rose. Kanıkey went on:

— Now count the trusts. Whatever remains of your father in the horde of the six accursed is yours, and you will take it back. First of all comes Akkelte, your father's musket. That musket is no plain iron; since its master died, blood runs from its ear, and in the dead of night it thunders of itself, so that Köböş starts up in his bed. Then come the six steels; six swords found by miracle in the Mediyan desert: Zulpukor first — your father's zulfiqar — then Coybolot, Kılbolot, Coykuma, Taşkeser, Arkesken. Demand the grey saddlebag; demand grandmother Çıyırdı's girdle. Then demand Akolpok, my child; I sewed it myself. Eight years I sewed it; into every stitch I worked the tooth-pattern, I twisted its thread with my own mouth, I tempered it with the light of my eyes; arrow does not pierce it, sword does not cut it. And there is Sırnayza besides: the lance that lame Bölökbay cast. Bölökbay tempered it not with water but with human tears; that is why Sırnayza does not stop where it strikes — it seeks the heart.

— And the horse, mother? Aktulpar is my grandfather's gift; did no horse remain to me from my father?

That night, for the first time, Kanıkey smiled; it was a sorrowful, distant smile.

— One remained, she said. Taybuurul remained. But his story is long; listen. In your father's youth there was a mischief-maker called Kırgılçal; one day he slandered me and your uncle Çubak, invented words that never were. Your father believed it; he grew cold toward me and would not look at my face. Out of spite, he opened a campaign to take the maiden Saykal. Saykal was a warrior's daughter; her grip on the lance was fiercer than a

man's. Your father and Saykal fought for days; lance against lance, horse against horse. Three days and three nights they fought, and neither could unhorse the other; the lance-shafts split, the horses' chests lathered with foam, and two armies watched from two hills and forgot to breathe. At one moment Saykal brought your father down from his horse, my child; the khan of khans was stretched on the ground. But the girl feared the Day of Judgment; she thought of the place in the hereafter reserved for one who sheds a khan's blood, dismounted, and with her own hands set your father on his horse again. And what did I do in those days, you ask: I was estranged — but my estrangement was toward the khan, not toward the Kırgız. Secretly I set his food in order, I drew off his excess fat, I put Akkula to training night after night. Your father grew nimble, the horse grew keen; in the end he prevailed. Then Saykal said: in this world I will not be a second wife, I will not trespass on Kanıkey's right; but in the world to come, let me be his. She had a marriage sealed for the hereafter, my child; in this world she suffered no touch, to the next world she gave her word. And as she went, she left a gift. You know the prayer grandfather Koşoy made at Kökötöy's memorial feast — that blessed prayer, that a son be given to Manas — well, she said: to the son who shall be born of that prayer, I bestow a colt come from the unseen. That colt is Taybuurul; his dam is unknown, his sire unknown. I raised him secretly at Taragay. When your father died, Taybuurul took to the mountains; for twelve years he has roamed the wild ranges, and they say that when he neighs he calls a name: Semetey, Semetey. He knows the year of your coming; he has returned to Talas, and he waits for you.

Semetey's eyes had sunk into the embers of the hearth; in the embers horses were running, lances were flashing. As the mother told on, the past came into the tent like a guest, and sat down.

— You must know your uncle Almambet also, said Kanıkey; whoever does not know whose son Külçoro is cannot love him as he deserves. Almambet was born in Beecin; he was the son of Azız Han, heir to the golden throne. But faith fell into his heart; for faith's sake he overturned his father's throne, left his homeland, and set out on the roads alone. He wandered the Altay, he wandered the Kañgay, he wandered the Sarı-Arka; no one knew his worth. He came to Kökçö's side; there too the slander of Akerkeç fastened on his collar, and he departed embittered. In those days your father saw a dream: an eagle had perched upon his arm, and a sword was girded at his waist. He had your father Bakay and grandfather Koşoy read it; and both said with one mouth: a lion is coming to you from

Beecin, and his name is Almambet; he is the eagle, he is the sword. And he came, my child. I was the first to welcome him in Buhara; it was I who held his horse's rein, I who first smiled upon his face. It was I who wedded him to Aruuke; I who hung the sword Arkesken at his wrist. It was for him that I asked my father Temir Han for Aktulpar; my father refused. And I struck my father from fatherhood, my child; Almambet's honor weighed heavier than my father's. Years later your grandfather gave you that horse with his own hand — so it seems even estrangement turns and wanders like fate itself.

The night wore on; the stars turned slowly over Buhara. Kanıkey's voice had grown hoarse, but she did not stop; she had kept the bitterest door for the last.

— Let me tell you also of your uncle Çubak's estrangement, that when you look at Kançoro you may see his father, and know how the heart of man is troubled. Çubak was a lion, but his pride was a lion's also. Once again, through that mischief-maker Kırgılçal, he took offense; and his grievance devoured his reason. He sat down and sent a letter to Beecin; he summoned Konurbay, Ezkara, Coloy, and Orokkır with their ten-thousands to Talas. He called the enemy down upon his own homeland, my child; grievance can drive a man even to that. Mercifully, his father Akbaltay reached him in time; he took his son by the collar and said: if you do not keep the word you have given, you are an infidel. That word brought Çubak back to the road; he turned, he repented. But a letter once sent does not return; Konurbay came with his army and struck by night. The Kırgız were caught sleeping, my child. Your father — that khan of khans — sprang barefoot from his bed; no horse, no musket, no armor. Death was at your father's neck that night. And who reached him, do you think? I reached him, my child. For six months your father had scorned me; because of Kırgılçal's slander he would not look at my face; I swallowed those six months in a single night. I led out Akkula, I snatched up Akkelte, I took Akolpok over my arm, I bound the Sır lance and the Zulfiqar to the saddle-straps, I rode through the midst of the enemy, and I brought them to your father. The night was pitch; the whine of arrows was like rain, and the flames of the burning tents had dyed the sky crimson. How many times the enemy rose before me, how many times I lay flat along my horse's neck, I did not count; the time for counting was the three hundred paces between death and the khan. Nor was that all; I too put on armor, my child. Woman as I was, I drove my horse against the enemy and raised the war-cry: Manas! That night your father came back from death; and coming back, he said to me: I wronged you, and you did not wrong me. There, my child, is the price of the road you are taking. To be the son of Manas is first to know scorn, and then to

know how to give everything. Give, but do not sell; bend, but do not break; take your vengeance, but do not deal in cruelty. That is your mother's testament.

Semetey took his mother's hand, laid it against his brow, pressed it to his eyes. He spoke no word; all the words there were to speak had been spoken that night.

✦ ✦ ✦

As the horizon paled, the eastern gate of Buhara creaked open. Aktulpar reared once upon the threshold; the Gök Küpü caftan flashed like steel in the first light. Semetey turned and looked back one last time: the place at the tower's foot where he had lain twelve days; white-haired Altınay before the gate; aged Temir Han in the palace's shadow. And before them all, upright, her tears turned inward, in her stone dignity, Kanıkey.

— Mother, said Semetey, give me your blessing.

— It is given, said Kanıkey. My white milk, my sleepless nights, the Sır-Derya I crossed forty-two times — all of it, I give freely. May Kıdır be the companion of your road. Set your ear to the mausoleum's dome; if it thunders, your father has received you. Love Kumayık, do not wound Akşumkar, trust Taybuurul. Until you reach your father Bakay, give your name to no one. And do not forget, my child: in Talas an enemy with a friend's face awaits you, and a friend you will take for an enemy. Keep the eye of your heart open.

The boy urged his horse forward. The ring of Aktulpar's hooves echoed on the gate-stones, then merged with the earth, then with the murmur of the steppe. The Ak-Çiy steppe stretched before him like a six days' sea; beyond the steppe were the passes, beyond the passes the Sır-Derya, beyond that Oluya-Ata, Corgo, Keñ-Kol, and wide Talas. Somewhere a hound was counting the last days of twelve years; above Çatır-Köl a falcon was trying its wing; in the wild mountains a courser was coming down toward Talas. And in Talas, beneath the dome of the clay mausoleum, in the hollow amid the figured walls, a secret was waiting for its owner.

Kanıkey stood at the gate until her son's silhouette melted into the mouth of the steppe. A voice within her, that unerring voice of a mother's heart, was saying: the road is longer yet, my child, and you do not yet know; before you reach Talas, traitors sprung from your own blood, the black shadow of the Közkaman line, will fall across your path. But that morning she did not say it; and had she said it, the boy would not have turned back.

The son of Manas had set out upon the road; and there is an old saying on the steppe: only death can turn back a lion who has taken the road, and death is in the hand of God.

CHAPTER 16

The Közkaman Betrayal and the Call of Talas

— ❖ —

In the exile palace of Bukar the candles had been trimmed low, the curtains drawn, and the night had settled into its own weight. Kanıkey looked long into the face of the boy kneeling at her knee; on the brow of his twelve years were his father's brow, his father's gaze. The words she had to speak had lain twelve years turned to stone in her heart, awaiting the day they would come to the tongue. In the hearth the embers crackled; outside, the watchmen of Bukar called to one another from afar, and fell silent. It was but a few days since Semetey had learned his lineage; for those few days sleep had not entered his eyes, food had not passed his throat. Whose son am I, whose son am I, he had murmured, pacing the palace courtyards; the child who had known himself the grandson of Temir Han had, in a single night, become the orphan of Manas.

— Listen, my child, said Kanıkey. The ledger of the past is written in blood; but you are the son of that blood, and it must be read. If I skip a single leaf, my telling will be

incomplete, and an incomplete word is like a crooked sword — it cuts its owner. Be patient, and hear it to the end.

And the telling began with the great battle of Talas. In those days Koñurbay had come driving the black multitude of Kıtay and Mançu, and the steppe had turned to dust and smoke; the horse-herds had bolted for the mountains, the grey yurts had been struck in a single night and drawn back. The forty companions had scattered, estranged by the poison of rumor; bearers of ill words had gone among them whispering, «the khan holds you in no esteem, the lady looks on you with scorn,» sowing discord; the horde stood empty, and the khan's right hand and left were left desolate. That day Kanıkey buried her womanhood beneath the felt, girded on armor, gathered her hair into her cap, and went into battle like a man. At the enemy's front came the giant Makil, mounted on a rhinoceros; no shield could hold against the beast's hide, and its breath made horses shy. Kanıkey rode in from the flank and set her lance true into the hollow of the giant's armpit; Makil toppled like a boulder torn from the mountain, the earth groaned, and both armies fell silent for a breath. Manas, for his part, drove Akkula against Orokkır, khan of the Şibee, and took his head at a single stroke. When the estranged heard the news they returned one by one: first came Çubak — came, and did not lift his eyes from the ground; after him Bakay, after him Almambet and Sırgak; and Acıbay came hastening behind them. Manas asked none of them about the past; no reproach is made to the servant who returns, he said — take your places. Almambet drew the rain-stone from his breast and summoned the Buurakan cloud; the sky darkened, mist descended upon the enemy, hail fell, earth and heaven were confounded; Kıtay and Mançu fell upon their own swords in their own darkness. Koñurbay barely saved his life and fled, tail tucked, to Beecin.

— Do not think a beaten enemy is chastened, said Kanıkey. Defeat only nurses a blacker seed in the enemy's heart.

In Beecin in those days Karıkan had the great drum beaten and the squares assembled. That drum was not beaten for nothing; when it sounded, either a throne changed or blood was demanded. Karıkan stood upon the step of his throne and cried out to the multitude: we could not conquer him with the sword, we could not conquer him with armies; to the man who kills Manas I will give my golden throne, I will give my daughter, I will give my seal. The square was silent; no one stepped forward, for the very name of Ayköl broke the sleep of Beecin. At last five men were found who had grown up among the Kalmaks — all five born Muslim, all five having forgotten their lineage and blackened their hearts:

Közkaman, Kökçököz, Celtiybes, Çañdıayak, Orozon. They pleaded kinship of blood, and they sold that blood. They knelt before the bronze idol and swore the oath of death: whoever turns back from this work, let his blood be lawful to shed and his hearth be extinguished, they said. They took into their bosoms a poison that had waited forty years beneath the earth — a black venom of which a single drop brings a camel to its knees — and took with them their sons, nine to each. Then they sat and had a tearful letter written: we are your own kin, our forefathers are one, our blood is one; we were left in the Kalmak's land, we were stripped of our faith, our backs are bent from bowing before the idol; deliver us, take us to your breast, it said. They dropped tears upon the paper — and even the tears they shed were lies. They sent the letter to Talas, loaded their camps for the migration, and followed after it themselves.

The letter was read in the assembly. The reader's voice trembled, the listeners' eyes filled; some wept, some rejoiced, saying «our blood is coming home to our blood.» Even Manas's own face softened; a man who grows up orphaned is naked against the word of kinship. Only into Kanıkey's heart did the worm find its way; she found the letter's weeping too practiced, and between its lines she saw the glint of a knife. She rose to her feet, and in the midst of the khans and the companions she did not spare her words:

— Can one raised among the Kalmaks be kin, Manas? Does a neck bowed forty years before the idol straighten at one letter? Within him lies the wish to kill you, had he the strength, and be khan of Beecin. Strike at dawn, root them out; or that root will wither you.

The words came out keen, and foresight pierced the eye. The assembly froze; a woman had said kill to the khan's guest — to some it seemed insolence, to some prophecy. Manas's eyes went dark with rage; shall they call me a man who slays his own blood, he thundered, shall I cut down a guest at a woman's word, shall my name go through the world as the guest-slayer? He called for the buldursun whip of Bölökbay's making, bound in elephant hide, and beat his lady in the middle of the assembly. Kanıkey neither fled nor cried out; she clenched her teeth, did not bend her knee, did not take her eyes from the khan's eyes — and that gaze was worse than the whip to Manas. His fury did not abate; he bared Zulpukor. In that instant Koşoy and Bakay threw themselves between; the two white-beards seized the khan's wrist:

— The bottom of patience is yellow gold, Manas! If the sword falls upon a woman's blood, that blood drips upon your own hearth. Cut short your anger — do not cut down your lady!

Zulpukor had its due; a blade once bared does not return bloodless to its sheath. Two elephants, spoils of Hindustan, were brought forth, and two elephants' heads were given to the sword; so was Kanıkey's life spared. That night Kanıkey bound her wound and bound her tongue; but the worm in her heart did not sleep.

Manas took the false kinsmen to his breast. When their caravan came in sight he went out to the very front to meet them, dismounted, and embraced Közkaman; my elder brother, he said, longing has darkened my eyes. To each he gave a horse, gave armor, had a white horde-tent raised, gave wives from among the beauties of the Kırgız; he opened the mouth of his treasury and poured gold before them; kımız flowed like a river, and the cauldrons boiled night and day. Közkaman and his brothers fattened on the fat of Talas and reddened on its kımız; by day they laughed at the feast-cloth, by night they whispered in the tent. Their laughter turned to honey, their hearts to venom. Kanıkey read their gait, their glances, the sidelong looks they traded over the kımız; she read it, and could not say it again — for the one who spoke once bore the whip's mark on her back, and the one who spoke twice would bear the sword at her neck. When their day came, they laid the snare. Közkaman sent word that he had fallen ill, and had trusting Manas summoned alone to his tent. Ayköl went without a single companion at his side; from kin, he thought, no evil comes. Kökçököz filled the gilded bowl, mixed the forty-year poison into the spirit, and offered it with both hands:

— Drink, my khan, that our blood may run warm together!

Manas raised the bowl; what comes from a kinsman's hand is to be drunk, he said, and drained it to the dregs. The poison ran through his forty veins at once; before his eyes the tent spun, the pole leaned; once more Ayköl strove to rise, his knees failed, and the mountainous body crashed down upon the felt. Kökçököz kicked the bowl aside and shouted to those outside; the traitors and their six hundred warriors surrounded the tent, crying, cut off his head, let us carry it to Beecin and take the golden throne — and they moved to take his head. In that narrow hour Akayar arrived — Akayar, who felled a camel with a single fist. He took mountain-heavy Manas upon his back, broke through the ring in the market of death, and came out between the swords. By the time word reached Kanıkey, the lady was already mounted; she had girded her four-fold arrow-proof armor and ridden

straight into the raid. She took her senseless khan up behind her saddle and turned; behind her the Oçogor arrows rained, and as she fled one arrow drove into her flesh, and her right breast was torn away. Kanıkey did not look back; she gave her blood to the wind, carried Manas to the Kak cave of Kayıpçı mountain, and hid him from the eyes of the world. Közkaman meanwhile stormed the horde, plundered the treasury, and took Akayar — wounded in eighteen places — captive alive.

— In that cave I bargained with death for forty days, said Kanıkey. My right side was fire, and at my left side lay my khan. I cauterized my own wound with my own hand; I reached each morning listening to the khan's breathing. If he dies, I said, this cave is a grave for us both; if he does not die, there shall remain no unpaid reckoning in the world.

She sent men to Egypt, sent men to Medina, sent men to Baghdad. From Baghdad, for gold weighed out by the batman, came the remedy called green-black. She ground the medicine and dripped it into her khan's mouth; Manas vomited poison by the handful, vomited black upon black, and with each spasm his veins came open. Kanıkey had forty barren mares slaughtered, and for sixty days she wrapped Manas in the flayed hides; the fat of the flesh worked into the wound, strength went down into the bone. On the morning after the sixty-first night, when the forty-first dressing was unbound, Manas — though pierced in forty places — stood upright, walked, gripped his horse's mane, and mounted.

Semetey listened on his knees, turned to stone. He did not ask, he did not weep; only his fists clenched, opened, clenched again. The embers in the hearth sank; Kanıkey stirred them, and took up the thread where she had left it.

✦ ✦ ✦

In those days the Közkaman caravan, having loaded its plunder by night, was fleeing by way of Suusamır, along the steep tracks of Eçki-Ölbös; the camels bent double under the weight of gold, the traitors' eyes ever behind them, the golden throne of Beecin ever before. The first to reach the encampment was Kırgılçal; the old companion could not believe what he saw: sixty sentries with their throats cut, Kanıkey's white palace ransacked, the chests broken open, the felts trampled, the hearths kicked apart. The old man dismounted and stood a while amid the ruin; what this hearth had never suffered at an enemy's hand, it had suffered at the hands of those who called themselves kin. From the mouth of the well

came a moan. Kırgılçal tied the eighty-fathom horsehair rope about his waist and let himself down into the well; he drew up Akayar, who had lain thirty days at the bottom with his eighteen wounds, dripped spirit into his mouth, and brought him round. Akayar poured out all that had passed, item by item: the poisoned bowl, the khan carried off, the breast torn away, the treasury plundered. Tears ran down the old man's beard; the tears dried, and fire came in their place.

At that hour the forty companions were at the game of ordo; sunk in the ring, all forty, they laughed and chased the knucklebones. Kırgılçal planted himself in their midst and cracked his whip upon the ground:

— Ho, you wreckers of the ordo ring! You — did Manas not give you Akboz to ride? You — the armor on your back, the helm on your head, did you not have them from him? You — the white house you sit in, the wife at your breast, the food in your cauldron — from whom did you have them? The khan is poisoned, the lady's breast is torn away, the treasury is crossing the mountains on Kalmak backs — and you sit here counting knucklebones! Shame upon the salt you have eaten, shame upon the swords you have girded!

He counted out, one by one, the horse given to each, the armor, the house, the wife; and as he counted, the companions sank into the earth. The knucklebones spilled from their palms; the ordo line was rubbed out beneath their feet. Shame did what fear could not: in a single breath the forty companions seized their weapons and leapt to their horses; some wept, some struck their own faces, some renewed their oath, saying «the debt of salt.» And Manas, now healed, came up with them; at his side rode Kanıkey, her hair bound up like a warrior's standard, and behind them Akayar, his wounds crusted over. Manas turned to his lady, and settled the account of the whip in the assembly with a single sentence: you spoke the truth, and I listened to the crooked; from this day forward, your word is my word. The soothsayer Tölök cast his forty-one stones upon the ground; the stones fell in the pattern of good fortune, and he read a favorable omen; the Irçı sang the epic before the army as it took the road, the forefathers were recited, and live coals were laid in every heart.

The traitors had encamped on Ambal Mountain, and with drums beating were playing at the slaying of Manas; they had made a puppet of felt, named it Manas, and were taking turns striking it with the sword, laughing — mocking, as they thought, the corpse of the dead khan. The spirit-jugs were toppling, and the nine sons of each were dividing gold

upon their fathers' cushions. At first light the lookout Celdeyboz burst out crying from the hilltop:

— Manas Han, who was called dead, has this day risen! Up — he is coming!

The drum fell silent, the game broke apart, the battle of arrows began. Six days, seven days, the arrow-rain did not slacken; Almambet worked the Sırbarañ musket with the steel bullets Kanıkey had packed into the white saddlebag, and felled a head with every shot. At the end of the seventh day Kökçököz lowered his shield and came out into the field, and set the condition of single combat:

— Choose a champion, let him come out against me! Let the side that is beaten enter the victor's faith!

In the camp the warriors looked at one another; the condition was heavy — the beaten would lose not only his head but his faith. Into the field walked Sırgak, sixteen years old — Sırgak of khan's blood, his heart ripened early. There were those who said, he is a child, he cannot endure; Sırgak turned and looked at them, and those who said it fell silent. Almambet, Bakay, and Çubak opened their hands and said «Amin!», sending their prayers after him; Kanıkey set upon the boy's shoulders the arrow-proof white caftan she had sewn with her own hands, and stroked his chest three times. Sırgak took his stand against Kökçököz, the giant of six moon-axes. Seven days they fought; seven days lance met lance and mace met mace, horses were changed, weapons were broken, and neither fell, and neither flinched. By night the two armies lit fires and waited; by day the dust swallowed the two bodies together and gave them back. On the eighth day patience overflowed, and the swords spoke. Almambet brought Közkaman down from Koñkulboz's back at a single stroke; Bakay came up and with Oykuma parted his head from his body. Çubak dashed Kökçököz to the ground from the back of Gök Kerik; Almambet cut off his head. Celtiybes fell, Çañdıayak fell, Orozon fell; of the nine sons of each, of the six hundred warriors, no breathing soul remained — not one of the Kalmaks was left alive. Sırgak walked to the middle of the field, filled his two palms with the traitors' black blood, and drank it; he did not leave Manas's vengeance lying on the ground. The plundered gold was loaded on camel-back and carried home to Talas; and to Şuutu, who brought the glad tidings, Manas said: ask of me whatever you will.

For sixty days the feast was given; sixty days the cauldrons boiled, sixty days the horses were raced, sixty days the bards did not fall silent. At the feast's end, by the hearth, Kanıkey for the first time opened the epic of her own girlhood — and as she told it to Semetey her

voice softened and her eyes wandered far away, as though it were not her son before her, but her own youth.

— I was fourteen, she said. Çubak had come up against Bukar, demanding the golden throne of my father Temir Han. No one could stand against him; the warriors bowed their heads, my father paled and withered. I armed myself in secret, put on a man's garb, and crossed lances with him in the field; neither he nor the field knew who I was. Çubak turned back; on the ridge of Ancıyan, Bakay met him, looked in his face, and laughed. Bakay said: that warrior of Bukar is a girl; Kanıkey is a treasure for Han Manas. Then, on the pretext of seeking Kumayık, they came as matchmakers; my father at first refused, then bent his knee before fate; seventy mullahs sealed the marriage. On the wedding night a knife slipped from the lattice wall and grazed Manas's wrist; I awaited my death that night — the khan laughed and said, «my lady's dowry, it seems, is steel.» Six times Bukar was plundered, and six times I raised that hearth again with service and with patience. The heart is not won by the sword, my child; the heart is won by service and by faithfulness. Mark this: your father's sword is your inheritance, and my patience is your inheritance also — whoever does not gird on both will lose both.

Then the telling turned to the present day. Kanıkey straightened and gathered her voice; she spoke not as a mother but as a khan's lady:

— In Talas sit your six uncles; at their head, Abıke and Köböş. Your father's estate is in their hands. Go, and claim your right. If they give it, take what is yours without tumult; if they do not give it, turn back before things grow evil. On the road put a halter on your anger; anger is the horse an orphan loses soonest.

Semetey raised his head; he had a thousand questions to ask, and chose one:

— Abıke and Köböş... are they not my father's own brothers, mother? Does brother raise his hand against brother's orphan?

— When a throne comes between, brotherhood wears thin, my child, said Kanıkey. And where it wears thin, it snaps. Yet do you stretch out your hand first; let it be they who break it, not you.

In the corner, seated among the felts, Çıyırdı — ninety-five years old — had kept silence until that hour. She stretched out her hand and drew to her knee the head of the boy young enough to be her grandson's grandson:

— When Manas died I reached for the white dagger, she said. No door was left to me but death. I raised the dagger; and from the cradle came a sound. You — you in your swaddling — smiled at me, stretched your tiny hand toward the blade, and then toward my breast. God did not let me die that day; He kept me for you. Now this is the term of your road: ten days going, ten days staying, ten days returning — thirty days. If you pass the thirty days and do not come, you will look upon my death. It is sworn.

The two mothers opened their hands from either side and prayed; the prayer rose all night like incense-smoke. May Kıdır be your companion, they said; may the çiltens walk at your right and your left; may the waters give you ford, may the mountains give you road, may the enemy's eye pass over you unseeing. Semetey did not sleep that night; he stared at the ceiling, and on the ceiling he saw Talas — the homeland he had never seen, but which his blood knew by heart.

✦ ✦ ✦

Semetey set out as dawn was breaking. Beneath him was led Temir Han's Aktulpar — Kanıkey's eye had picked him out of the herd, and for years he had been fed for this day; on his back was fitted the steel that the master Ismayıl had forged, in his hand was placed the lance of Kölöy Han, over him was drawn Kanıkey's arrow-proof white caftan; at his waist was bound the grey kise found in the Mediyan desert. All Bukar poured out to the gates; the women wept, the old men prayed, the children ran after the horse; Temir Han kissed his grandson's brow, made to say something, and could not. Kanıkey did not weep; lest weeping bind the road, she let her tears run inward; with her own hand she set her son's stirrup straight, with her own hand she tightened the girth. As Aktulpar took his first step, Çıyırdı's lips were moving: thirty days, thirty days, thirty days. When the last gate of the city fell behind him, Semetey turned and looked; two mothers, two dark figures, stood motionless upon the wall. He did not look back again.

The road was the reverse of the road of ordeal along which his mother had fled twelve years before, barefoot, with her son in swaddling; the son went reading his mother's ordeal backwards. His mother had gone along these roads hungry, he went fed; his mother had walked by night and hidden by day, he rode in broad daylight with his head high — and at every step he knew by whose patience that difference had been paid. He halted at the shore of Keñ-Kölçük — this had been his mother's girlhood lake; on the face of a black stone he

saw a writing, bent down, and read: on the stone was Kanıkey's name, the date of the night of flight, and a prayer. He ran his finger along the carving; the stone was cold, the writing was warm. He came to Kül-Tokoy: the place where, in his swaddling days, on the night his mother's milk dried up with blood, he had been fed by the milk that ran from a plane tree; the plane still stood, and from the cleft in its trunk a white seep seemed to sweat even yet. Semetey dismounted and laid his face at the foot of the plane. He crossed Aman-Col; and as the road lengthened, the voice within him grew: Talas, Talas, Talas.

When he came to Kokon, matters changed. The kuşbegi of Kokon had not forgotten the fear of the old tribute bound in Manas's lifetime, nor the vengeance owed for the champion Töö; he sent to ask who this colt-hearted boy riding for Talas might be, and when he learned, the worm entered his heart: let the seed of Manas be seized before it grows, he said. First marksmen were sent out in squads of ten; they shot their arrows, the boy did not turn to look, and the white caftan let no arrow through. Then came the lancers, then the mace-bearers, then the swordsmen — all by tens, champion upon champion. Semetey rode on looking straight before him; he did not turn to the stricken, he did not stoop to the fallen. But the attackers did not end, and patience ended. At the point where his soul could bear no more, he wheeled Aktulpar about, bared his sword, and from the very depth of his chest made his father's name a war-cry:

— Manas!

The cry burst like a cannon against the mud-brick walls of Kokon; in twelve years that name had never been heard so near in these lands, and the knees of those who heard it came unstrung. That day some sixty champions were broken; some by the sword, some by the lance, some beneath his horse's hooves. Aktulpar wheeled and wheeled in the dust, and the boy's arm knew no tiring; the kuşbegi watched from the rampart and his face drained: this is no child, he said, this is the risen youth of Manas. The men of Kokon barred their fortress gates, climbed the ramparts to watch, and sent no man after him again. Semetey wiped his sword, sheathed it, and turned back to his road; behind him remained the creak of closing gates.

He crossed the Sır-Dayra; the water ran grey on grey, and on the far bank the road narrowed and wound into the mountains. When he reached Kayıpçı mountain the day was going down; he found the Kak cave where his mother had hidden his poisoned father from the world. He went in: on the stone there was still the mark of soot, in the hearth-place still ash; in a corner, left from who knows what night, a dried strip of wound-dressing. Here my

father lay, he said; here my mother bargained forty days with death — one breast torn away, seeking medicine for her khan before her own blood had dried. That night he slept in the cave; stone was his pillow, the past his blanket. What he saw in his dream he told no one; but when he rose in the morning, his face was older than the night before. He climbed the Corgo pass; when he gained the crest, the wind came first and the sight after: Talas, his father's inheritance, in all its breadth, with its green and its water, its horse-herds and its shadow, spread itself beneath his feet. Semetey drew rein and looked long. Here, he said within himself, is the place I dreamed of without knowing its name.

✦ ✦ ✦

Talas met him with the trusts that had waited for their owner. The first to come was Kumayık — the hound with the golden collar-band at his neck, his eyes hollowed from twelve years of watching the roads. He had bowed his neck to no one, taken no morsel from any hand, and for years had turned away without sniffing the bones the six accursed threw him. From afar he caught the scent and howled; that howl gathered the whole waiting of twelve years into a single breath. He came running, and coming, did not attack; he bent his neck and rubbed it against Aktulpar's knee, lay down, rose, circled, lay down again — the waiting of twelve years would not fit inside one body. Semetey bent and stroked the gold-banded neck; from the hound's eye there fell a tear such as does not belong in an animal's eye. Then it was as if the sky split: from the crags of Imerme a shadow came gliding down. It was Akşumkar — the falcon of Manas; when his master died he had wandered the world from Mecca to Baghdad, sought and not found, and returned to wait upon his crag. He glided, circled, circled again, and brought his needle-winged fledgling and set it upon the orphan's arm: take it, he seemed to say; your father's bird is yours now — I have grown old, let my young one grow upon your arm.

When Semetey came to the Talas river, it was in flood; the Ürbüs had risen, the snow-water had come down, and it ran foam upon foam; the logs it dragged crashed from rock to rock. Those on the bank said it could not be crossed; whoever enters this water in this season does not come out, they said. The boy turned his horse's head to the water:

— My father never turned back from running water; shall his son turn back?

And he plunged in. The water struck his chest and heeled Aktulpar over; and in that instant figures appeared upon the face of the water: foremost Manas — his shoulder a mountain, his gaze a sun; beside him Almambet, behind him Çubak and Sırgak, and nearer, Bakay and Acıbay. The figures laid hold of the horse's halter and drew him on; the flood grew calm for the space of a prayer, and the boy came out alive on the far bank. He turned and looked: the water was water again, the foam was foam; the figures were gone, but the warmth of the hands that had touched his arm remained.

The homeland had shown him first its face; now it showed its wounds. He came to Keñ-Şor: this was the place of his father's death; the mourning-signs set up, the rags tied, the poles driven in had become a forest over the years — a people's lament had sprouted from the ground, tree by tree. Semetey rode slowly among the trees; every rag bound to a branch was a supplication, every pole a tear. So this is how my father was loved, he said within himself; so a man dies, and from a people's soil a forest grows. But a little beyond, the stones of the mosque lay overthrown: Abıke and Köböş at their head, the six accursed — Çıybıt, Koçkor, Adıbay, and Kölbay among them — had torn down Manas's mosque, cut down its teachers and its mullahs, and divided the khan's goods measuring with the whip: a whip's length for you, a whip's length for me. And Semetey heard more yet, from a shepherd on the road: Kanıkey, your mother — they made her the carcass in their game of kökbörü and dragged her behind the horses. The boy's hands went to his sword; his mother's word became his rein: if they give it, take it without tumult; if they do not give it, turn back before things grow evil. He drew his hand from the sword; but the black of his eyes darkened by a shade.

He halted before the grey rock. He remembered his mother's words: I had five champions hollow out the treasury and hid it in the bosom of the grey rock; what fell into the hands of the six accursed, what they divided measuring with the whip, is the crumbs of the treasure; the substance of it I kept for you. Craft lay hidden in the rock's face; a knowing eye would find it, an unknowing one would pass. Semetey found the hollow and entered: his father's treasure, untouched by any hand for twelve years, burned in the darkness like stars — ingots in rows, armor hanging, swords wrapped in oiled felt. And at the threshold, five cairns of stone: the graves of the five champions given poison to drink that the secret might be kept. Semetey stood still; for the first time he saw the whole weight of his mother's steel — the steel of a mother who for her son's sake had taken five lives,

offering the poison with her own hand. He shuddered; he shuddered, and did not judge. Before all five he bowed:

— Your due is upon my neck, he said. Your secret raised me; your vengeance and your recompense shall come from my hand.

Then he came to the mausoleum. The great kümbez for which Kanıkey had ordered six thousand goats slaughtered, its bricks boiled in milk and fat, stood in the middle of the steppe like a mountain; eighty mullahs brought from Egypt and from Baghdad had worked its walls with picture upon picture. Semetey went in; in the dimness the walls found their tongue: here was the Great Campaign against Beecin — the flood of horses, the forest of standards; here Almambet at his trial with Burulça, his heart between two fires; here Sırgak, dragging Almambet back from death in the midst of the enemy; here Bakay's white beard, Çubak's wrath, and above them all, upon Akkula, like the sun, Manas. The boy's knees gave way; all the orphanhood of twelve years gathered into a single word, and broke loose toward the dome:

— Father!

And the mausoleum's interior roared. Stone gave voice to stone, the dome turned, the roar descended like a breath and filled the boy's chest; there was no word in it, no syllable, yet Semetey understood every letter: this was the sign from the father — rise, go, wrest the inheritance from the six accursed; the time for weeping is past, the time for taking has come. He wiped his face and straightened; the child who had entered bent double came out with his shoulders open. On the threshold he stopped and turned once more; in the dimness, the eyes of Manas on the wall seemed to have turned with him toward the door.

At the road's end, as the sun leaned to the west, he saw a cloud of dust on the plain; the dust drew nearer, the sound of camels' moaning came — seven hundred camels, seven hundred necks, moaning with one voice. It was the herd of an old man who kept camels; the beasts, catching the boy's scent, surrounded him, made a ring, and circled him, moaning as they went. The eldest among them — Celmayan, ninety-five years old, Manas's own camel — came shedding his white wool as he walked, lowered his long neck onto the orphan's shoulder, and having lowered it, did not lift it again. Semetey threw his arms about the camel's neck; this time he did not hold back his tears.

And out of the dust, behind his camels, came a white-bearded old man — slowly, his eyes narrowed, his heart running on ahead. It was Bakay, who for twelve years had herded camels, who had never sat at the table of the six accursed, who had waited for his orphan,

sipping hope little by little like kımız. He stopped; his aged eyes made out the boy with his arms about Celmayan's neck, made out the white caftan, made out Aktulpar; his lips moved, and no sound came. With every step the steppe was narrowing, the twelve years were thinning, and two orphans — one with a ladder set against ninety, one twelve years old — were flowing toward each other.

CHAPTER 17

The Hidden Tomb and the Reunion of Orphans

— ❖ —

With the first light of morning, the shadow of a rider fell across the broad plain below Talas. The hoofbeats of Aktulpar rang out over grazing lands where for twelve years only the wind had wandered; carrying the dust of Buhara on his saddle and his mother Kanıkey's last look in his heart, twelve-year-old Semetey set his first foot thus upon the land of his fathers. The steppe stretched without end or edge; the snowy summits of the Ala-Too stood between sky and earth like a white oath. The boy drew in the reins and breathed the air deeply. He did not know the scent of this soil, but his blood knew it; blood finds the road before the man does.

How many nights, how many dreams had he dreamed on the road: a white-bearded elder, a rider on a grey horse, and a vast shade whose face could not be made out, all speaking the same words in his dream: Talas awaits you; the ash of your hearth keeps warm. His mother Kanıkey had not wept when she sent him off; that stately lady was of those

who pour their tears inward, into the heart. She had given him only two trusts: she had placed a white shirt in his bosom, and she had given one admonition: When you reach Talas, trust no one at once, she had said; some wolves put on the sheep's fleece, and some lions the goat's hide. Do not lean on a man untested; and do not wound the one you test. The boy now repeated these words as if murmuring them in fever, bent low over Aktulpar's mane, scanning the horizon.

First a shadow appeared in the distance; whether a black cloud or a boulder torn loose from the earth, none could tell. As it drew nearer it became plain: it was a great black camel with a golden halter, its neck long, its hump bowed by the years. It was Celmayan, bearer of the burden of ninety-five years; the blessed camel left from Manas, having caught its master's scent on the skin of the son, came cleaving the steppe. The camel halted before Semetey; from its great dark eyes two lines of tears fell, as tears fall from the eyes of men. Then it turned and ran toward the burial mound of Manas; it ran and ran, its ancient legs running as if grown young again. At the foot of the mound it stopped, stretched its neck toward the sky, and gave its mourning cry. It cried once, and hearts were crushed; it cried twice, and the mountains answered; it cried a third time, and it seemed the sky would split. Then it turned toward the qibla, bent its forelegs, and knelt. It laid its head upon the ground and fixed its eyes on Semetey. It had no tongue, but its whole bearing spoke: take me, make me the sacrifice, offer me to the soul of my master.

Semetey dismounted. As his mother had taught him, he performed his ablutions with cold water, turned his face to the qibla, and recited the Kulhüvallâh. When he took the knife in his hand, his hands did not tremble; his heart trembled.

— Your soul to God Most High, he said, your merit to my father Manas.

The knife came down. But no blood flowed upon the ground, and no mark remained in the earth. Semetey blinked once; and the body of the blessed camel had vanished, as the morning mist melts away in the sun. Only the golden halter remained in his hand, and in his nostrils the still-rising smoke of sacrifice. In later days the white-bearded elders of the steppe would tell of it: Celmayan did not die, they would say; on the blessed Friday nights, and on the Nights of Power, it cries its mourning cry at the tomb of Manas, and eyes that can see, see it. Semetey kissed the golden halter and pressed it to his brow; as a trust from his mother Kanıkey he bound it fast to the pommel of his saddle. Then he leapt to his horse and rode on.

A little way on, beyond a rise, he came upon an old man herding a drove of camels. His garment of goatskin hung in tatters, his white beard fell to his chest, his eyes had sunk deep in their sockets; beneath him was a grey horse, saddle-galled, its ribs to be counted one by one. Who could have known that this spent beast had once been Köktulpar, who raced the wind; now his name had dwindled to Kökçolok, and in twelve years of destitution he had grown gaunt and galled. And who could have known that the old man was Bakay, the white-bearded companion of Manas, elder of the forty companions; for twelve years he had herded the camels of usurpers, grazing his dead hope upon the steppe.

Semetey's heart went out toward him; but his mother's word was in his ear: In Talas there is a man, Kanıkey had said, more stout-hearted even than your father; his name is Bakay, his mind is greater than the mountain, his heart deeper than the sea. The boy wished to test this man. He rode his horse up before the old man and sat stiff in the saddle, offering no greeting.

— Ho, old man, he said, I am the son of Canaalı Karaç, bey of Çambıl-Bel. From my father's treasury I scatter a camel-load of gold to the poor; my open hand is a legend through seven lands. Tell me now, whose slave are you, whose camels do you herd?

Bakay raised his head and looked long into the boy's face; he looked as one who searches for something, did not find it, and turned back to his work.

— If you are a traveler, go your way, my child, he said. My own grief is enough for me.

— What grief is that? Speak, and let us hear it! And if you will not speak, I shall take that galled nag beneath you as blood-price. Such is the custom in our land: he who turns away one asking the road forfeits his horse.

— This horse is given to no man.

— It is given, old man, it is given! Who do you think you are? A scrap of a camel-herd wrapped in goatskin! Your beard has whitened, but your wits have not. Over the horse and the head of slave-clad wretches like you, bey's sons like me give the orders!

No sooner had he said it than such lightning flashed in the old man's eyes that Semetey's heart leapt into his mouth. Bakay sprang down from his horse; and how he came down — the ground shook. He seized the young birch that stood beside him, wrenched it once, tore it up by the roots; whirling the tree above his head like a mace, its earth scattering in the air, he came striding at the boy.

— Whose son do you call a slave, you rabid whelp! Come and see what the wrist of a slave is made of!

Semetey pulled his horse back and raised his hand.

— Hold, aksakal, hold! Do not strike; hear my word first. Let me tell you a tale, a tale come out of Buhara; then strike, and I am content.

Bakay stopped; the birch in his hand, his breath heaving like a bellows, he waited. The boy told his tale: In Buhara there had been a race; six hundred and forty-four horses had run, and behind them all a mare thought lame, Taytoru they called her, entered in the race by a widow's tears. On the last flat Taytoru had grown wings; one by one she had passed six hundred and forty-three horses and breasted the rope first. The boy who rode her, beside himself with joy, not knowing what he said, had flung out a war-cry: Manas! he had shouted — Manas! though no one had ever taught him the name. That same boy had then wrestled a giant come from Kokon, one they called Töö Balban, and though he was twelve years old he had torn the arm from his shoulder and laid him in the dust; his grandfather Temirkan had wished to set the golden crown upon his head...

The birch fell from Bakay's hand. The old man's lips moved, but no sound came; his eyes wandered over the boy's face, as one deciphers an unknown script.

— That boy... what is that boy's name? he asked at last, hoarsely.

Semetey looked away; he had come to the cruelest turn of the test.

— That boy's name was Semetey, he said. Was, I say; for on the road here, crossing the Sır-Derya, he was taken by the water. I saw it with my own eyes: the grey churning flood took him and carried him away. Kanıkey's orphan is dead, old man; the hearth of Manas is gone out.

The words ended, and the world stood still. For a moment Bakay stood like a driven stake; then his knees gave way and he sank down. He tore at his white beard with both hands, lifted his face to the sky, and poured out his lament: Darkness has fallen on Talas, he said; twelve years I waited, twelve years I herded camels, twelve years I suckled one hope, and if that too is dead, why do I go on living? And even as he spoke he drew the white-hilted dagger from his bosom and turned its point against his own breast. Semetey's senses left him; he snatched the aybalta from his belt and swung it; the flat of the axe-blade struck the spine of the dagger, and the white dagger flew three paces off. The boy flung himself from his horse and seized the old man by the wrists.

— Do not, father! I lied, I lied! Semetey is not dead; Semetey is I! Forgive me, for the honored face of my mother Kanıkey; I was testing you — I wished to see what your heart was made of!

Bakay took the boy by the chin and turned his face to the sun; he looked, and looked, and looked. The breadth of the brow was that brow, the knitting of the eyebrows that knitting, the eagle's weight of the gaze that same weight: as if cast from the mold, the countenance of Manas stood in the face of the boy.

— My lion... said Bakay; he could find no other word. — Lion of my lion!

They embraced as father and son are reunited; and both of them wept. The old man's twelve years and the boy's orphan-grown years flowed into one another; the steppe gathered the sobbing of the two brave hearts into its wind and carried it to the Ala-Too.

✦ ✦ ✦

When the weeping had stilled, Bakay seated the boy at the head of a spring. First he stroked Kökçolok's mane: This horse, he said, was once Köktulpar; beneath me he crossed the roads of Beecin and laid wagers with the wind. Oppression ruins the horse, my child, as it ruins the man; but what is sound at the root it can never wholly ruin. Then he sat down and rendered the account of the twelve years, item by item. When Manas passed, he said, before the embers of the hearth had cooled, Abıke and Köböş rose up; the six wicked ones joined as one and fell upon the horde. The treacherous forty companions went over to them, and Kırgılçal too gave his bridle into their hands. What Kanıkey had woven they unraveled; what Manas had gathered they scattered; they divided the herds among themselves and pillaged the homeland. I, said Bakay, took my faithful people of five hundred hearths and withdrew to the Bek-Cayloo of Beş-Taş; twelve years I fought from there, I fought alone. Abıke sent sixty champions against me; I broke all sixty, one by one, but I could not tear out the root of the oppression. The root of oppression runs deep, my child; only the hand of the rightful owner can pull it out.

Then the old man rose and led the boy toward Kapka-Taş. Among the rocks they entered through a cleft that even a seeing eye could not have found. Bakay struck flint; the darkness of the cave parted before a flame, and Semetey could not believe what he saw: chests of gold, ingots of silver, stones that burned like fire, five great carpets brought from

Beecin, silk in bolt upon bolt, weapons ranged in rows along the wall. All five carpets hung upon the wall; their figures, whether dragon or bird none could say, seemed to stir into life with the dancing of the flame. The boy reached out his hand, then drew it back; to touch the treasure was to touch the labor of the dead. Into the rock of the cave a name had been carved; Semetey traced the letters with his finger.

— Kanıkey, he read; and his voice trembled. — My mother's name.

— Your mother had that name carved, said Bakay. She laid up this treasure against the day of the enemy; even in flight, that stately lady thought of those left behind. Take this; it is yours.

What he held out was an aybalta inlaid with gold; its edge had been quenched in poison-water, its blade flashed like the sky. Master Bölökbay had forged it, the armorer of Manas. Semetey girded on the aybalta; and as he girded it, it was as though an arm stronger than his own arm had been joined to his shoulder.

When they came out of the cave, Bakay was silent a long while; on the threshold of the greatest secret, one keeps silence. Then he spoke: You know the tomb, he said; all the world believes your father buried there. It was done so that they should not know. Your mother Kanıkey feared the enemy would reach into the grave, would work harm upon the bones; she had a figure carved from poplar wood, matched to his height, covered with fine leather, wrapped in the shroud, and it was that figure she had buried in the tomb. The true Manas we washed and shrouded; seventy Arab champions gave their shoulders, and at midnight we bore him to the black rock of Eçkilik. In the breast of the rock there is a hollowed cave; your father lies there, twelve years he has lain there.

The road lengthened, the day declined; when they came before the black rock, such a stillness had settled that even a bird's wing would have sounded like a sin. Before the mouth of the cave, come from none knew where, a bull camel stood: Bozbuura they called him. When the camel saw them it turned toward the qibla and knelt; it knelt as Celmayan had knelt. Bakay drew the knife across; the blood of the sacrifice ran down to the foot of the black rock, and the earth received it.

— You alone shall go in, said Bakay. It is the son's right.

Semetey went in. The inside of the cave was not dim; a light whose source could not be known poured down upon a golden bier. On the bier lay his father. The tongue would not call him dead: he was as one sleeping, as one smiling; beneath his head, for a pillow, lay the

White Kur'an, and on his face was not the dust of twelve years but the brightness of a wedding morning. Semetey sank to his knees; he did not weep, he could not weep; his heart opened like a well, and the whole world poured into it. Beside his father lay two men, each like a mountain: Bakay told him afterward — one was Almambet, who had broken away from Beecin, the confidant of forty years; the other, Çubak, pillar of dark strength. At the foot lay Sırgak, stretched out — Sırgak, vanguard on the road, lightning in battle. At the head there was a small body; Koenaalı, said Bakay, martyred at twelve years old — he went at your age, at your very age. And the one in his bosom? asked the boy. The one in his bosom, said the old man, is Kız Saykal; she fought your father on the field of champions, and afterward was bound to him by a marriage sealed for the Last Day; in this world they could not be joined, and here they lie breast to breast.

Bakay sat down on the threshold of the cave and told the epic of each in turn. He told of Almambet first: He was a noble lord of Beecin, he said; he grew up at Esenkan's table, but a light fell into his heart, and he left the black palace, came to the faith, took refuge in your father's bosom. First he went to Kökçö, and they did not know his worth; Manas knew it. The two became as if suckled by one mother; Çıyırdı gave him too her white milk, that the milk-brotherhood might never be broken by blood. In the Great Campaign he was the vanguard; it was he who split the snows and scattered the mists. He told of Çubak: his anger was a mountain landslide, his loyalty a mountain spring; once he and Almambet fell out, and your father reconciled them with a single word, and from that day two wrists became one fist. He told of Sırgak: nimblest of the forty, guide of the night road; who plunged in with bared sword before Beecin and did not return. When he told of Koenaalı his voice grew thin: He was still a child, he said; we held him back, saying war is no game, and he wept; to be counted a man, he died a martyr. When he came to Kız Saykal, the old man fell silent and smoothed his beard: Words do not suffice to tell of her, he said; we thought a warrior was measured by the sword — that lady broke the measure. The stones of the cave listened, and the boy's heart learned it all by heart; on that threshold Semetey mourned these dead, whose names he heard now for the first time, as his own kin.

When they came out, the mouth of the cave sealed itself; they turned and looked, and in the black rock there was neither cleft nor trace. Semetey looked again: the rock was rock, and the secret was secret.

From there their road fell to the black cave of Kayıpçı. In this den, for twelve years, a lame master had lived hidden, wrapped in deer hides: Bölökbay, armorer of Manas, keeper

of his treasure. With him were forty waifs; forty orphans, forty destitute, all forty fled from oppression into this darkness. When Bölökbay saw Semetey's face he was shaken as though he had seen Manas; he kissed him, breathed in the scent of him, then sat down and, weeping all the while, told the story of the forty-handled cauldron: it had come from the unseen world, that cauldron, and had boiled at the feast of Manas; the six wicked ones could not suffer even that, and with an axe they had split it in two down the middle. When the cauldron is split in two, the people are split in two, said the master; from that day to this, the cauldron of Talas has not boiled.

— Cast it anew, said Bakay. Let it be an augury for Semetey's fortune: if the cauldron comes out fair, his fortune is open.

Bölökbay fired the forge three days, hammered the mold three days, recited prayers three days. Bracing his lame foot against the stone, drawing the bellows drenched in sweat, he kept murmuring as he worked: O you who came from the unseen, O you who boiled at the feast of Manas; if you were broken, the people were broken; if you are made whole, the people are made whole; do not shame us, do not shame us. The forty waifs stood ringed about the forge, holding their breath; under the soot-black ceiling of the cave the sparks flew like stars. On the fortieth morning the mold was broken, and the cauldron came forth: fairer than in the age of Manas, its forty handles shining like forty suns. Bölökbay clasped the cauldron in his arms and pressed his soot-stained face against it; whether he wept or laughed could not be told. The vowed grey goat was slaughtered, the cauldron was set, the meat put in; the cauldron filled and overflowed; the forty waifs ate their fill, and still there was more. The fortune was open; not open only, but overflowing.

Semetey scattered gold from the treasure cave to the forty destitute; he scattered it by the handful, and as he scattered it, faces bloomed. Then the chests Kanıkey had stored away years before were opened: out of them came war-garments no arrow could pierce, steeped not in the smell of sweat but in the smell of musk; forty lances, forty swords, forty muskets were ranged in rows. The forty waifs stripped, dressed, and armed themselves; the blazed dun horses of Manas were drawn from the herd, and the forty mounted forty steeds. Bakay looked on, and his eyes filled: it was as if the forty companions had been born again; the hope that had died had risen in forty bodies.

Before the forty, Semetey spoke his oath:

— Abıke and Köböş are my elder kin; first I shall go to them in peace and ask their blessing. If they come to the right road, well and good; if they do not, their blood is on their

own necks. This is the reckoning of the sixty days' road: forty days of preparation, twenty days of travel. Until that day, wait upon the ridge of Kayıpçı; do not come down until you see my smoke.

The forty remained on the ridge of Kayıpçı; Bakay took the boy and brought him to his hidden camp of five hundred hearths. The camp was pitched in a sheltered hollow of Beş-Taş, out of all sight; the felt of the grey yurts had darkened with rain, but their hearths had never gone out. When the camp saw Semetey, the earth itself was moved: some wept, some laughed, some laughed while weeping. One old man clung to the boy's stirrup and would not let go: Twelve years, he said; twelve years, every morning we looked to the road, every evening we turned back from the road. They say the watcher's eyes wear out upon the road; worn out they are, and thanks be — they saw before they went blind. Baymırza, ninety-five years old, led up his grey camel-colt with trembling hands, ranged nine black bulls behind it, and offered them all in sacrifice to the soul of Manas and for the head of Semetey; the camp was drowned in tears of joy. One sourness alone there was: Bakay's craven son Baytaylak, seeing from afar the dust of the forty, had thought the enemy come, and had stampeded the herds into the mountains. Bakay hauled his son into the midst and swung the whip once; Baytaylak sprawled upon the ground.

— For him who is no man, bread is forbidden, and renown besides, said the old man. Rise, bury your shame in the earth, and then come back.

That night a great fire was kindled in the middle of the camp; the kımız skins were opened, the cauldrons boiled. The elders came one by one and kissed Semetey's brow; some had seen the feast of Manas, some had given sons to the Great Campaign. One old woman took the boy's hands into her palms and gazed at them long: These hands, she said, are those hands; you can tell by the wrist — what it grips, it tears loose. Semetey was abashed and reddened; the child of twelve years, for one moment, forgot the burden on his shoulders and was a child.

✦ ✦ ✦

The next day Bakay's face darkened again; a face that darkens in the midst of joy is the herald of black news.

— Before you go down to Talas, there is one thing more you must know, he said. Your own grandfather, Cakıp Han... The people have taken to calling him the swine-khan, my child; do not stop your ears — listen. Abıke and Köböş are his sons; the throne is in their hands, and the cunning is in his bosom. Since he heard of your coming he has had poisoned boza set to steep in the jar; before his seat he has had a bearskin spread, and beneath the skin a pit dug forty fathoms deep. He will greet his grandson either with poison or with the pit. Let me go before you; come you behind me; keep your eye on me and your hand on your aybalta.

Bakay went first to Cakıp's horde. When the old khan saw him he foamed at first; he cursed, he reviled, he raised his staff and came at him: Is it you who ground your teeth at me these twelve years, is it you who laid ambushes against me from the mountain! But when amid the talk he heard that Semetey was alive and had entered Talas, his face changed in an instant; the staff dropped from his hand and tears burst from his eyes — true tears come from the heart; his came from the eyes alone.

— My grandson! Kanıkey's lamb! Has the light of my eyes come? To the bringer of the good news, a hundred head from the herd and a hundred ingots from the treasury!

Bakay bowed with folded hands, but in going he did not go; by the foot of the wall, in the shadow of the felts, he lay in wait. Soon Cakıp drew his wife Bakdöölöt to his side; the old man's whisper seeped between the felts like the hiss of a snake:

— It is you who will put the poison in the boza bowl. A grandson is a seed; the seed grows into a tree, the tree casts a shadow, and in that shadow my throne rots. Put in the poison, and let us be rid of him.

— I will not, said Bakdöölöt; her voice was low, but it was like stone. — May the hand wither that is raised against the orphan of Manas. I have been a mother; motherhood stands higher than khanship.

Cakıp's answer was not a word; he snatched up the hand-mallet and brought it down on his wife's head. Bakdöölöt's head was split open, her white kerchief dyed scarlet with blood; the lady made no sound, bound up her wound, and swore an oath within herself.

Toward evening Semetey came. Cakıp met his grandson at the door; he embraced him, breathed in the scent of him, wept; and gesturing toward the bearskin, bade him be seated. Semetey, with his mother's courtesy, stood at the threshold:

— Grandfather, sit you first; until you are seated, I will not sit.

Cakıp did not sit; he circled the skin, and knowing his own pit, did not set foot upon it. The bowls of boza were brought. Bakdöölöt had arranged the bowls herself: into Bakay's bowl she had put honey, that he who tasted might know its taste; and as she offered the poisoned bowl to Semetey, she signed to him with brow and eye: do not drink, said the sign; this bowl is death. Semetey understood; understood, and gave no sign of it. He took the bowl in both hands and turned to his grandfather:

— Grandfather, such is the custom in our land: the first of the drink belongs to the eldest. I pray you, drink first.

Cakıp's face went red, then ashen.

— I... my stomach will not bear boza, my child; the physician has forbidden it; I am fasting today; my tooth aches...

Excuse chased excuse; and as the excuses multiplied, sweat beaded on Cakıp's brow, and his eyes shuttled between the bowl and the door. Semetey looked at his grandfather, then at the bowl; and the last hope within him died in that look. So it is true, he said within himself; so in this horde blood is not thicker than water; so the throne is sweeter than the grandson. He rose to his feet and flung the bowl at the threshold. The boza spilled over the stone; the grey dog lying at the threshold rose and sniffed it; its sniffing and its falling were one, and with its four legs in the air, it died. The inside of the horde turned to ice.

Semetey turned; in his eyes was the look Manas had worn in the black days. He took the empty bowl from the ground, filled it with what remained of the scalding boza at the hearth, and brought it down over his grandfather's head. Cakıp's hair blazed and crackled, his beard blazed, his mustache blazed; the khan rolled bellowing to the ground and writhed in the ashes. Semetey drew his aybalta and stood over him; he raised it — and did not bring it down.

— You bear the name of a grandfather, he said; and his voice came as from a cleft in stone. — For that name's sake your life is spared. But know this: raise your hand against my line once more, and neither name shall remain, nor mercy.

Then he demanded his due; demanded it as inheritance, not as alms:

— Where is my father's Akkelte? Where is his Akolpok? His six keen steels — Zulpukor, Oykuma, Açalbars, Kılbolot, Coybolot, Narkesken — where are they? Where is the horse Buurul that Saykal gave? Bring them out, deliver them up; the orphan's goods are serpent's venom — they burn the one who swallows them.

— Do not ask for Akkelte, groaned Cakıp from under the ashes; Akkelte surrenders to no man, it seeks its master's scent... But the boy did not listen; an inheritance is not given — it is taken.

Groaning, Cakıp gave up the keys. When the grey saddlebag of Manas, filled with rubies, was brought forth, four strong men could not lift it; Bakay came, gripped it with one hand, raised it, and loaded it behind Kökçolok's saddle. That night the bag was carried to the treasure cave and given into Bölökbay's keeping; the master pressed the trust to his breast and wept.

That night Bakay and Semetey lay outside the camp, under the stars. The old man pointed to the sky: That star is your father's star, he said; for twelve years it burned dim, and tonight it blazes. They talked until the boy slept; the steppe spread itself over them like a quilt.

✦ ✦ ✦

In the morning Bakay led the boy up a ridge and showed him Talas: the grazing lands left desolate, the hearths gone out, the mounds fallen to ruin. The old man spoke as one keening a lament; then he said that he had kept the bitterest for the last.

— You saw Almambet in the cave; one remembrance of him, and one trust, remain in this world. His wife Burulça — the cherished daughter of Esenkan, rose of the palaces of Beecin — has been made a bondwoman to cowherds at the hands of the six wicked ones; she carries water, gathers dung, takes the whip. His son Külçoro — Aruuke carried him six years in her womb; she bore him, and three days after, she passed away. That orphan too they beat and drove out to herding; from his sixth year he has known oppression, and with oppression he has come to his twelfth.

They arrived. At the farthest edge of the camp stood a ragged black tent; before it, Burulça, who had once worn the silk of Beecin, was stacking dung-cakes in a patched smock. Semetey dismounted and bent his knee before the woman; from his bosom he drew the white shirt, his mother Kanıkey's trust, and held it out with both hands.

— Ayaş mother, he said; my mother Kanıkey sends her greeting. She kept this shirt for you; one day my son will come, she said, and give it from his own hand.

Burulça took the shirt; she breathed its scent, she knew it, and she wept, shaking through her whole body. Then she seated the boy in the shadow of the tent and poured out her epic: I grew up cherished in the palaces of Beecin, she said; on a Night of Power a light entered my dream, and the end of that light reached to Talas. Almambet came; I gave him faith, he gave me heart; I brought him to Islam, and I went to him as wife. He rode out on the Great Campaign, rode out and did not return. When the black news came I seized the knife; Külçoro, six years old, clung to my wrist — mother, he said, if you too go, into whose face shall I look to remember my father? That day I died, and that day I lived again. When the six wicked ones fell upon us, first they took my silk, then my tent, then my name; they said not daughter of Esenkan, they said not lady of Almambet — they said bondwoman, and gave me into the hands of cowherds. I carried water, I gathered dung, I took the whip; I endured it all, but one thing I could not endure: to watch from afar as my son was beaten, and to be able to say nothing. A mother's heart, my child, overflows if it overflows; if it breaks, it makes no sound. Last year a dervish with a grey-blue bull passed my door; he gave me glad tidings: be patient, he said, a boy on a white colt will come, he will bend his knee before the black tent, and that day the oppression will end. He went, his dust remained; looking at his dust I lived a year. That day is this day, my child; thanks be to God, I have seen it.

The words were not yet done when a cry sounded from the hilltop; a barefoot boy smelling of sheep, his clothing all in tatters, came down the slope as if flying. It was Külçoro; he too had heard the dervish's tidings and had left the flock and run. The two orphans came together before the tent; they embraced and could not be parted; like the flour of white wheat they were kneaded into one another. The son of Almambet and the son of Manas; two orphanhoods became a single heart. Bakay wept on one side, Burulça on the other; the whole camp wept; that day in Talas, tears flowed more freely than kımız.

Kanıkey's white saddlebag was opened: out of it came a kaftan worked with gold at the collar, a shirt of silk, breeches of leather, and for the head a cap of lynx fur. Külçoro's shepherd's rags were stripped away and cast off; the orphan dressed and girded himself; and as he dressed, it was as if the sun rose a second time. Bakay laid his hand on the boy's shoulder: This was the bearing of your father Almambet, he said; hold your head high as he did, and let your eye flinch no more than his. Külçoro bent his knee before Semetey: Be my elder brother, he said; let me be your shadow, let me be your sword; our fathers laid their heads on one pillow — let us lay our heads on one road. Semetey raised him up and pressed

him to his breast: You are no companion-at-arms to me, but a brother, he said; my bread is your bread, my blood is your blood. A white-grey mare was offered to the soul of Almambet; its prayer rose to the sky, its savor spread over the steppe.

As evening fell, Semetey rose to his feet before the forty and the camp; he laid his right hand on his heart and his left on the haft of his aybalta.

— Hear, and bear witness, he said. Abıke and Köböş are my elder kin; to my six elders I shall go first in peace, I shall invoke the right of bread and salt, I shall say: let us make my father's hearth smoke together. If they come to the right road, I shall bury the past in the past. If they do not — I shall gather Argın and Kırgız under one banner, I shall stand at the gate of Beecin, and I shall demand my father Manas's blood from Konurbay, drop by drop. If I break this oath, may Celmayan's mourning cry be a burden on my neck, and my father's smiling face a debt against me in the world to come.

The camp said amen with one voice. Bakay, listening to the boy's oath, smoothed his beard and slowly nodded his head: To go first in peace, he said; so Manas too would have done — first he sent the word, and then he drew the sword. But know that the ear of the wicked is deaf to the word of peace; say it nonetheless, that on the Day of Judgment your face may be white. Behind the Ala-Too the sun went down; on the ridge of Kayıpçı forty riders waited, forty dark shapes. In the night descending upon the steppe there appeared, far off, on the far side of Talas, the lights of the great horde: the horde of Abıke and Köböş. Semetey gazed long at those lights; whether it was peace that called, or the sword, only tomorrow would tell.

CHAPTER 18

The Awakening of Akkelte and the Great Migration

— ❖ —

An early autumn had settled over Talas that year; the poplars were shedding their leaves before they yellowed, and the water of the Keñ-Kol ran grey, as if it carried tidings from a house of mourning. Bakay, his white beard given to the wind, stood on the spine of the hill and looked down at the camps spread tent by tent below. The shoulder of the twelve-year-old brave who stood beside him was already the shoulder of a man; but in his eyes there still shone the light of the boy who had chased a ball through the orchards of Bukar.

— That Talas you see, said Bakay, his voice like a knife whetted on stone, is the homeland of your father. But today it is no homeland to you, my child. With Abıke and Köböş at their head, the six wicked ones hold dominion here. The forty companions, who once would have walked into death behind your father, would not utter Manas now if the war-cry were raised — they would utter Köböş. Kırgılçal has taken his place before them, Tazbaymat trails behind; they have forgotten the name of the man whose bread they ate. So

long as the turncoat stands and the usurper sits, this Talas will be no homeland for you. A homeland is taken, my child. A homeland is washed in blood and taken back.

Semetey made no answer. He looked long down at the plain where his father had once raised his horde, at the hearths where a stranger's smoke now rose; and something within him, like cold iron, settled into place.

The next morning they rode out to scout. The steppe was without end, the grass rose to the knee, there was not one cloud in the sky. Toward noon, where the horizon shimmered, a dark shape appeared: a single rider, alone, coming straight at them. It grew as it neared; the horse was Cakıp's charger Telküröñ — Semetey knew it from Bakay's telling — but the majesty upon its back was more like a mountain than a man. The rider's armor played in the sunlight like a black flame, and the standard snapped in the wind.

— Hold, and ask who it is, Bakay called out; but young blood does not ask, does not question. Semetey leveled his steel lance, spurred the dark bay he rode — for Taybuurul was not yet his — closed the distance in a single breath, and drove the lance at the rider's chest.

The lance flew apart in three pieces, like a reed struck against rock. The answering blow was like the toppling of a mountain: for the first time since his birth Semetey was torn from the saddle; he turned in the air and rolled into the grass. He sprang to his feet and reached for his sword; the rider did not ride him down, but only began to circle him, slowly, heavily. Semetey circled too; around Bakay, sword in hand, he circled and circled like a helpless wolf cub; the rider showed neither an opening nor any haste.

Then the rider lifted off the helmet, and hair poured down over the shoulders like a black torrent.

— In my brother's homeland, said a woman's voice — a voice deep, wounded, yet like steel — who is this child who raises a lance?

Bakay's knees gave way. The old man, the man who in his lifetime had come back from the walls of Beecin, sank down where he stood.

— Kardıgaç... Is it you, Kardıgaç?

It was Kardıgaç. Manas's own sister; the warrior maiden who at seventeen had split the enemy's ranks, who had girded on Zulpukor and fought forty-one days without pause. When her horse Telkızıl was shot and fell upon her, she had fallen into the hands of the giant Ilama, and afterward, by Manas's own hand, been given to Carmanas, the giant of

Celpiniş; from that day all word of the homeland had been cut off from her. Now, after all the years, she had come to see her brother; in her eyes that longing, in her voice that joy:

— Where is my brother? Why does his horde stand desolate? Where is my Manas, Bakay?

Bakay could not lift his head. The word that for twelve years had never been spoken whole to anyone, always half swallowed, fell from his mouth like a stone:

— Manas has passed, Kardıgaç. Twelve years it has been. The Beecin campaign swallowed them all: Almambet fell, Çubak fell — Çubak who struck off the head of the giant Döñgö with Oykuma, he too is no more. Sırgak in his twentieth year, tender young Sırgak, fell. Serek fell. How many companions were left on the road to Beecin. Akkula too was shot. Kanıkey, a widow, took her babe and fled to Bukar. And that babe is the orphan who stands before you: Semetey.

The blood drained first from Kardıgaç's face, then the strength from her knees. She fell forward onto Telküröñ's mane, slid from there to the earth, and lay in a swoon. Bakay took her head upon his knee; he sprinkled water, he recited prayers; and when she came to herself and raised the lament anew, to comfort her he told of those far-off days: of Kökötöy's memorial feast, of the gathering of the saints, of how they opened their palms and pleaded for the childless Manas; of blessed Koşoy's benediction, and of how, after that benediction, God gave Manas this son. — Look, he said, Manas died, but his trace did not die. There is his trace, standing at your very knee.

Bakay told on and on; and as he told, Kardıgaç's grief, changing shape upon shape, turned into something else. The lament ended, the sobbing stilled; for a while the warrior woman gazed at the patch of sky showing through the smoke-ring of the grey yurt. Her brother had passed; but the sky was in its place, the Ala-Too was in its place, and her brother's blood ran in the veins of this boy.

Kardıgaç straightened. The tears had dried, and fire had filled their place.

— Let me give the six wicked ones and the turncoat forty companions to the mouth of this Zulpukor, she said. Let me hang the head of Köböş, who sits on my brother's throne, from the pommel of my saddle. Give me the road.

But Semetey, for the first time that day, spoke like the son of a khan:

— Aunt, he said, the hand that spills a kinsman's blood loses its blessing. If today you cut down Abıke and Köböş, tomorrow it will be said in the mouths of the people, "The

line of Manas drank its own blood"; and once slander is abroad, the wrath of God walks behind it. If vengeance is owed, the vengeance is mine; when its day comes I will take it with my own hand. Return to your homeland; I swear it, I will come to your gate with seven hundred red camels, and if the White Giant and the Blue Giant grind their teeth against you, I will fight at your side. To this oath the Ala-Too is witness, and this steppe is witness.

Kardıgaç weighed the weight of these words, looked into the orphan's eyes, saw her brother there, and bowed her head. She turned Telküröñ's head toward Celpiniş; but as she rode away another thought passed through her: seen, she went; unseen, she returned. From that day Kardıgaç circled the country of Talas without any man's knowing; a dark shape by night, a mirage by day, she watched over the orphan from afar.

In those days Köböş's council sat at Ürbüs. Köböş, flushed with kımız, was playing at khanship and saying whatever came to his mouth: — What was this Manas of yours, after all? A pauper's son. It is I who hold Talas; it is I who give the war-cry. At the foot of the council Şuutu and Irçı-uul exchanged a glance; Irçı-uul could not hold his tongue, and without kopuz, without melody, he cried straight out: — At Manas's gate you could not have served as a dog, Köböş! You grew fat on the crumbs of his table, and now you play khan over the soil where you buried his bones!

The council turned to ice; Köböş's hand was on the point of reaching his whip when through the door came an old man on a stunted grey horse, wearing a worn çapan, his beard smeared with dust. No one turned to look; Şuutu looked. Şuutu, who could read years from a man's face and lineage from a horse's gait, knew the old schooling in the step of that stunted grey horse, the set of the shoulders beneath that çapan. When they went outside he took the old man's arm and said in a low voice:

— Bakay, he said, no disguise can hide you from me. Tell me: has the orphan come?

Bakay did not deny it. That night Şuutu spread his fingers to the stars and rendered the reckoning of the twelve-beast calendar: — Count what year it was when Manas passed; the rat has gone by, the ox has gone by, the leopard has gone by, the hare has gone by... the count is complete: the orphan has entered his twelfth year. This year is the year of return, Bakay; if he does not take his inheritance before he comes to a man's age, the usurpers will wither him at the root. Then he began to count, bending down finger after finger: — Akolpok is in their hands, Akkelte is in their hands; the six swords come down from heaven — Zulpukor, Oykuma, Açalbars, Coykuma, Kılbolot, Arkesken — hang on their wall.

Kumayık has come to be counted their hound, Akşuñkar their bird. These are not to be taken by force; while the forty companions stand in the horde, the orphan cannot pass the gate. But I know a ruse that will scatter the forty companions down a ten days' road.

And he smiled; it was the smile of the wolf, the smile of days spent wrapped in the sheep's fleece.

✦ ✦ ✦

The ruse did its work in three days. Two trusted riders, sent out secretly by Şuutu, drenched their horses in sweat, tore their collars, and plunged into Talas covered in dust, crying in the marketplace: — The Kıtay host has fallen upon us! Kara-Buura is burning, Çatkal is overrun; ride before the passes are taken! The lie wore a kaftan more convincing than truth ever wore; no one doubted. The forty companions, with Adıbay, Kölbay, Çıybıt, and Koçkor beside them, buckled on their armor in headlong haste; Kırgılçal at the front, Tazbaymat at the rear, they strung out along the ten days' road and were gone. The dust settled, the road emptied, the horde stood desolate.

— The gate is open, said Şuutu, bending to Bakay's ear. Ten days they will go, ten days they will return; twenty days is enough for you and to spare. But do not forget: the wicked have tears, and the wicked have oaths; be deceived by neither.

That morning Bakay brought Semetey into his father's homeland. The orphan walked through his plundered inheritance: in the white palace of Manas sat Abıke; the throne was Köböş's; Kanıkey's white palace had been ransacked, its door torn away, its felts stripped. The faces of the herdsmen they met upon the road were sallow; heavy tribute had bent the backs of Argın and Kırgız, and some had scattered to the Çüy, some to Taşken. Semetey saw it all and spoke of none of it; he saved his words for his fist.

Abıke met them at the gate and — from who knows which chamber of his heart — found tears. He clasped the orphan to his breast and sobbed:

— Twelve years I have searched for you, my child! I sent men to Bukar, I asked after your trail. The enmity that came between us is the work of slanderers; would I raise a hand against my brother's son? Come, enter; the seat of honor is yours.

As for Köböş, he was nowhere to be seen; he had taken Manas's widow Akılay into his bosom, and, sodden with kımız, lay sleeping still in the noon sun.

Semetey did not take the seat of honor; he stood between door and hearth, on that line between a guest and a claimant, and he spoke:

— I grew up believing myself the son of İsmayıl. I chased a ball through Bukar and never asked whose seed I was. One day the charcoal-burner Sarıtaz barred my way; "You are not İsmayıl's son but Manas's," he said; "Akun han is your father-in-law, Ayçürök the wife pledged to you in the cradle." From that day to this, my inward heart says Talas, my outward tongue says Talas. Now I claim my inheritance: I claim Kumayık, I claim Akşuñkar, Akolpok, Akkelte, the six swords, and my father's treasury. Give them, and there is peace between us; withhold them, and...

He did not speak the end of the sentence; there was no need to speak it.

Abıke — whether from fear or from conscience none could say — delivered up each relic with its story. — We found Kumayık swaddled at the head of the shrine, he said; your mother Kanıkey suckled him at her own breast; she called him not dog but child. Akşuñkar, when your father died, turned his face from mankind and withdrew to the crags; if you call him, perhaps he will come down. That Akolpok you see, your mother sewed for seven years; drawing the needle through, her teeth wore down like a doorframe; in the middle of the İt-Baspas desert your father bared his chest in this coat to sixty lances, to seventy lances, and not from one needle-hole did blood seep. Take it, it is yours. Sırnayza is yours, the grey pouch is yours. And here is Akkelte...

At that very moment a clamor broke out within, and the door was kicked open. Köböş, his eyes bowls of blood, could barely stand, yet his voice toppled mountains:

— Who is giving, and what is he giving? Who was this Manas of yours — a pauper, a bare-shanked beggar! These goods are not his, they are my spoils! Is it you who claims an inheritance, you Bukar bastard? I will cut your throat where you stand and drain your blood into the felt!

And he reached for Coykuma where it hung upon the wall.

Before his hand reached the hilt, Semetey's fist reached him. It was a single fist; but in that fist were twelve years of orphanhood, a mother's worn-down teeth, a father's hidden tomb. Köböş was flung like a sack, and his head jammed fast in the kerege lattice of the grey yurt; legs in the air, his khanship-playing head caught in the wooden lattice, he thrashed and thrashed.

And in that instant, Akkelte, hanging on the wall, rattled of its own accord. Softly at first, like a handful of pebbles spilling; then from its barrel broke such a roar that the felt of the grey yurt trembled and the horses outside reared. No one had touched it; no one needed to touch it. The weapon had known its true heir.

Bakay wet his white beard with tears: — Did you hear? he said. Even the iron knew him. Even the iron.

They loaded the inheritance onto Aktulpar: Akolpok uppermost, Akkelte on its shoulder-strap, the six swords wrapped in felt; Sırnayza in hand, the grey pouch in the bosom. With each relic Semetey took into his hands he felt a different weight; and this weight was not the iron's, but the weight of the shoulders that had borne the iron. As he girded on Zulpukor he thought: my aunt girded this on, at seventeen, for forty-one days. As he wrapped Oykuma in felt he thought: with this Çubak struck off the head of the giant Döñgö. An inheritance, he said to himself, is not property; an inheritance is a debt. Abıke came with them as far as the gate and wept once more, whether falsely or truly; Semetey did not turn to look.

They were a bowshot from the horde when hoofbeats overtook them from behind. It was Köböş; he had broken the lattice and freed himself, and blind with rage, without the patience even to throw on a saddle, he had leapt onto Toruaygır's bare back and given chase. In his hand was an aybalta, and the first he reached was Bakay: the aybalta came down and split the old man's crown four fingers deep. Blood ran into Bakay's white beard; the old man slumped over the pommel of his saddle.

The world showed red to Semetey's eyes. He wheeled his horse and came down upon Köböş like a black winter; he tore him from the horse and dashed him to the earth, knelt upon his chest, and bared Zulpukor. The sword flamed once in the sunlight —

— My child!

It was Bakay who called, drenched in blood; his voice was weak, but his words were heavy:

— Spare one spoonful of his blood. It is kinsman's blood; if a drop of it falls to the earth, seven generations cannot wash it away. Take a blood-price in place of his blood; let his life stay with him, and his punishment with God.

Zulpukor hung in the air; it hung, it trembled, it returned to its sheath. Semetey rose to his feet, took Köböş by the collar, and hauled him upright:

— The price of your blood is Toruaygır, he said. I take the horse; your life I remit to God. Walk.

But God's remittance came due swiftly. Köböş, in his fury at the horse being taken from under him, still cursing and reviling, seized Toruaygır's halter; the stallion, as though it had long since chosen its new master, reared. Köböş staggered, slipped, fell; and his head came down upon the black stone of the hearth. The stone did not yield as the lattice had. Köböş's skull was split; seven days and seven nights he lay and lay in his blood, neither dying nor mending; and in the land where he had played at khanship, none but Akılay so much as gave him water.

When the forty companions returned on the tenth day, they had found at Kara-Buura not the Kıtay but the wind; and in Talas the world had changed. Akılay tore her hair and flung herself into their midst: — The orphan has come, he has broken Köböş, he has carried off the inheritance; to horse, overtake him, cut him down! But the companions did not stir. Acıbay stepped forward; his years were advanced, his word was final:

— I was there on the day that orphan was born, he said. At Kökötöy's feast the saints opened their palms, blessed Koşoy gave the benediction; he was born clutching black blood in his fist, and on his brow was the seal of his father. May the hand wither that lifts a lance against the son of Manas.

Şuutu too rose and stood beside him: — The count is complete, the year is complete, he said. This is the year of return; he who draws a sword against the returning one would shame even a turncoat. The forty companions fell silent; some from shame, some from fear, some — perhaps — from an old love. There was no pursuit.

In those days a miracle was found upon the open steppe: Taybuurul. The charger Manas had set apart for Semetey had run loose in the wild for twelve years, but he had not gone; his mane had matted to felt, his eyes had sunk hollow from watching the road, but he had not gone. When Semetey drew near, the horse neighed; and such was that neigh that those who heard it thought, "Akkula has risen from the dead." In thanksgiving, Bozbee of the line of Kambar-ata, the stallion of Manas, was offered in sacrifice; his flesh boiled in forty cauldrons, the poor were fed, prayers were said. From camp to camp Argın and Kırgız carried the glad tidings to one another: — The son of Manas has come! Our fire that had gone out has caught flame; our Manas who died is risen!

The scattered people began to gather again: those who had gone to the Çüy came back, those blown to Taşken returned; every arriving caravan raised one more yurt in Talas, and

every yurt raised set one more hearth smoking. In the council at Ürbüs the tongues that had disparaged Manas as a pauper fell silent; Irçı-uul took up his kopuz, and the melodies unsung for twelve years were sung again.

And through all those festive nights, at the border of the darkness the fires could not reach, a dark shape rode round and round. It was Kardıgaç; she showed herself to no one, she asked nothing of anyone; she only kept the watch.

✦ ✦ ✦

From the summit of Karool-Taş, Kardıgaç looked upon Talas one last time. Below, the smoke rose straight and true; the orphan's hearth was lit, his enemy cowed, his horse found. — Your trust stands, brother, she whispered to the wind; then she turned Telküröñ's head toward the setting sun, toward Celpiniş, and did not look back again.

And at the Keñ-Kol, partings had turned to reunions. Kumayık had returned: that pup found swaddled at the head of the shrine was now like a lion grown heavy, broad in the chest; when he bayed, the sound struck from valley to valley and came back again. Akşuñkar too, who had made the crags of the pass his home, had come down; but he had not come down alone: he had brought the young one he had raised himself upon the rock, and setting the young bird, its wing-feathers newly hardened, upon Semetey's arm, he himself rose once more into the air — as though he were handing down the inheritance through his own line as well.

The time had come to go; for there was a word that had been given. Çıyırdı in her ninety-fifth year — the great mother who had borne Manas, who had warmed Semetey at her breast through the nights of flight — had taken from her grandson in Bukar a pledge of thirty days: "If you do not return in thirty days, count me dead." The days were numbered. Semetey put on Akolpok — his mother's seven years of needlework settled upon his shoulders; he shouldered Akkelte — the iron lay silent on the shoulder it knew; he girded on Zulpukor and mounted Taybuurul. Kumayık ran ahead, the young falcon perched upon his arm; Bakay and the braves who had joined him ranged themselves behind, and the road to Bukar, without regard for night or day, was rolled up and rolled up beneath them.

In Bukar, in the shadow of Temirkan's minaret, there was a woman whose eyes had not left the road for twelve years. Kanıkey took out the spyglass of Manas, the one relic she had

hidden in her bosom on the night of flight, and held it to the horizon as she did every morning; and that morning she saw dust upon the horizon. Before the dust ran a black shadow whose four feet did not touch the ground; behind it, on a rider's arm, a white bird flashed.

The spyglass nearly fell from her hand; she did not let it fall, but pressed it to her breast and came down the stairs as if on wings:

— Blessed day, mother — glad tidings! My orphan comes in sight! Kumayık before him, Akşuñkar on his arm — my Semetey is coming!

Çıyırdı in her ninety-fifth year cast away her staff and hastened to the gate; all Bukar poured out to its gates. When the caravan entered the city, Kumayık ran straight to Kanıkey, made his lion's body small, and laid his head against the woman's breast; in twelve years he had not forgotten the scent of the breast that had suckled him. Kanıkey clasped the hound's head and wept; she clasped her son's stirrup and wept; Çıyırdı took her grandson's face between her palms and wept; not one soul in Bukar was left that day who did not weep.

But at the bottom of the joy there was a thorn, and at the evening meal it drove home. Semetey looked into his mother's eyes:

— Mother, he said, for twelve years you raised me as İsmayıl's son. You hid my father's name from me; I learned my lineage from the mouth of a charcoal-burner. Had it not been for Sarıtaz, I should never have seen Talas even in a dream. It is not for me to reproach you; but know this: I will make that charcoal-burner a khan. I swear it — I will not leave this land until I have crowned Sarıtaz as Sarı Han.

Kanıkey bowed her head; she did not say — could not say — that concealment too is a form of mothering; she said only: — Your oath is my oath.

Temir Han, for his part, wished to bind his grandson to Bukar; and when that failed, he offered his army: — Thousands of my chosen soldiers are yours; take Talas with them. Semetey shook his head:

— Shall I open my own homeland with a foreign sword, grandfather? Shall I cut down my own people with my own hand? Argın and Kırgız are my flesh; I will not set a stranger's knife to my flesh. Give me the road; I will go alone.

Temir Han's pride was stung, his brow darkened; then the sage Körpöcan stepped between them and with sweet words soothed the khan's anger: — The eaglet comes down

from the crag on its own wing, my khan; push it, and it falls; let it be, and it flies. The khan softened, and that day the twelve gates of Bukar and its twelve treasuries were thrown open wide. Kanıkey walked slowly among a thousand tulpars; she examined teeth, felt along shanks, measured with her eye, and at last laid her hand upon the mane of Karakaşka: — This, she said, is a horse for the road; it does not abandon its rider halfway. Tuuçunak was led out for Sarıtaz, armor of sky-blue rings was put upon his back, a fur cap set upon his head; a bowl of kımız was placed in his charcoal-black hands, and yesterday's charcoal-burner, by the right of the oath that had been sworn, became Sarı Han — a khan in name and in bearing alike.

One task remained: the orphan must not return to his homeland alone. The beauties of Bukar were assembled; but the choosing of a bride is not work for the eye — it is work for the discerning. Kölöy, the master reader of natures, was summoned; he walked slowly among hundreds of girls, studying the walk of one, the glance of another, the silence of a third; at last he stopped, took by the hand Şaatemir's daughter Çaçıkey, fourteen years old, and led her forth: — This is she, he said; her patience is deep, her lineage sound.

Şaatemir's face turned white as paper. — My khan, he said to Temir Han, my daughter is betrothed to Toltoy, son of Bagış, bey of the Cediger; the word has been given. If Toltoy hears of this he will open a blood feud, and I cannot carry that blood. Temir Han struck his hand upon his breast: — If Toltoy rages, I will answer him myself. The weight of the word is on my shoulder; give your daughter with your blessing. Nine days and nine nights the wedding feast was held; the sermon was read, the marriage sealed; Çaçıkey, fourteen years old, drew her white kerchief over her head and went as a bride to the orphan's homeland — and no one, in the joy of those nine days, wished to think of the black wind that would one day blow from the Cediger.

✦ ✦ ✦

The caravan of migration set out one morning after prayers: eighty red camels, laden to their humps with gold and goods; eighty chosen champions ranged on either flank; in the midst, the white-canopied litter of Kanıkey and Çıyırdı; before it, Kanıkey's stately figure upon Karakaşka; at the very front, Semetey upon Taybuurul. Kumayık ran wide circles round the caravan, and the young falcon rode now on the arm, now in the sky.

At Keń-Kölçük a good omen met them: a plane tree that had stood dry for years had decked itself in fresh leaf, as though it had greened not that spring but that very week; on its branch a nightingale sang out of season, and sang and sang. Kanıkey laid her hand upon the tree: — The dry branch has greened, she said; a fortune that has withered may green again.

And when they came to Kül-Tokoy, Kanıkey came down from the litter, stood at the foot of a great poplar, and called her son to her side:

— See this tree, my child. It was the night of flight; behind us Abıke's riders, you in my arms, my breast gone dry, and you blue with hunger. I sank down at the foot of this poplar and thought we would die. I took hold of its branch; and from its branch milk ran into my palm. The tree suckled you that night. On another night I had hidden you, swaddled, at the foot of a thicket, and when I came back a doe maral had bent her forelegs and was suckling you. You were not raised on my milk alone, my child; the steppe suckled you. You are in the steppe's debt.

Semetey laid his brow against the bark of the poplar and stayed so a long while.

By day they marched, by night they camped; at the halting places Çıyırdı poured out the tales of ninety-five years to her grandson, Çaçıkey served kımız with her white hands, the eighty champions stood watch in turn. Three days and three nights it went so; on the fourth day dust appeared on the horizon, and the color of the dust was not the color of friends.

The road had fallen into the lands of Kokon, and ill fortune had taken the place of good. For Abıke and Köböş had not sat idle; by Kırgılçal's hand they had sent letters to four khans, inciting them: "The orphan comes laden with the gold of Bukar; bar his road, divide the goods." Kozubek of Kokon ranged a thousand champions, gathered from the hands of four khans, along both sides of a defile; the lances glittered like a bed of reeds.

Kanıkey seized her son's rein: — Let us pass unseen, my child; there is the night, there is the roundabout way; let us pass without the smell of blood. Semetey gently loosed his mother's hand from his rein:

— Mother, he said, shall the son of Manas enter his father's homeland like a thief, taking shelter in the dark? But do not fear: I raise no hand against him who raises none against me. I will ask for the road; if they give it, I will bless them and pass.

And he rode out alone before the caravan and sent his voice into the defile: — We are travelers; we ask for the road! The answer was a volley of arrows. The arrows struck Akolpok, broke, and fell away; and then Semetey tore from the whole depth of his chest his father's war-cry, the name Talas had not heard in twelve years, and roared it out:

— Manas! Manas!

Taybuurul was loosed like a bow. What happened then, the thousand men in the defile could not tell even afterward: a black wind came in among them, and where it entered, a red rift opened. Canaalı han stood against it and was cut from his saddle; Karaç han was overtaken in flight and stretched upon the ground; Orokcan, the champion come from Hindistan, blocked the way with his two men's bulk and swung his mace — the mace went wide, and Zulpukor did not. The thousand champions, their leaders fallen, scattered like a herd; those who could flee fled, and those who could not packed into the fortress of Kokand and barred the gates.

Semetey's blood had come to the boil; he turned Taybuurul's head toward the fortress. He wished to break down the gates and demand a reckoning of those within, to wither the root of the incitement here and now. In that moment a hand — a hand charcoal-black, but bearing now a khan's ring — took hold of Taybuurul's bit. It was Sarı Han:

— Hold, my child, he said. Most of those in the fortress are blameless folk; the khans opened this war — shall women and children pay its price? If we enter into the blood of an innocent people, how shall we answer for that blood tomorrow at the Last Judgment? Anger is like a guest: entertain it, but do not let it settle in your house.

There was such weight in the way that hand, which had held the bowl of kımız, now held the bit, that Semetey's boiling blood stood still. He bowed his head and turned his horse to the road; and Kokand, behind its barred gates, remained in the debt of a single sentence spoken by yesterday's charcoal-burner.

They found the ford of the Sır-Dayra; the waters were choked with foam, but the caravan crossed over safe and whole. The holy graves along the road were visited one by one; sacrifices were offered, prayers recited, leave for the road asked of the spirits. And as the mountains rose, Kanıkey's face began to change; every pass, every saddle of the hills opened an old wound in the woman's eyes.

At the head of one pass she halted Karakaşka and, stretching out her hand to her son, pointed them out one by one:

— That you see is the Küyük pass, my child. Twelve years ago I crossed it barefoot; the snow came to the knee, the blood of my feet was dyeing my trail red, and I walked heaping snow over my blood lest they find me by my trail. That is the Çakmak pass; there we went hungry three days and three nights; I carried you on my back, and Çıyırdı in her ninetieth year broke the path before me. And that far one is the Corgo pass; there I said, now we die — and we did not die. We did not die, my child. Because beyond that pass lay Talas, and I had not sworn to die before I saw Talas again.

Semetey looked at the roads his mother had crossed on bleeding feet; then he lifted his head. Beyond the pass, under the evening sun, a valley burned like gold: Talas. His father's homeland, his father's tomb, his father's throne — and around that throne, still moving, the shadows of the usurpers.

— Mother, he said softly, the homeland you left barefoot — I shall bring you into it on Karakaşka's back. But know this: the throne awaits its owner, and the usurper his reckoning. From this pass there is a descent, and no turning back.

The caravan moved on. The bells of the eighty red camels struck up a melody in the evening air, half mourning and half festival; Kumayık sprang forward, and the young falcon drew one last circle in the sky. And before the coming caravan itself, its name fell upon Talas: the son of Manas is returning. Some stoked their hearths with new hope; some — in Abıke's palace, behind Akılay's curtain — whetted their knives anew. The river that cut the valley in two flowed on as darkness fell; and over the bloodied throne, and over the waiting of a girl like a white swan in a far country, the same stars rose.

CHAPTER 19

The Blood-Stained Throne and Ayçürök the White Swan

— ❖ —

Twelve years, twelve winters, twelve springs had passed behind the mud-brick walls of Buhara; and in the autumn of the twelfth year Kanıkey turned her son's bridle toward Talas. They passed along the dusty caravan road of Oluya-Ata and crossed the snow-scented throat of the Corgo pass; the wind licked the stones of the defile, the horses' manes stiffened with ice, and Kanıkey's eyes wandered far off, over the white shoulders of the Ala-Too. They came down from the pass, and Talas appeared; but the Talas she saw was not the Talas she had left. The banks of the Keñ-Kol lay desolate; the camping grounds had blackened, the hearthstones were overturned, the marks of the felt tents lay smothered in grass. No colt whinnied, no child laughed; only the water flowed, as it had always flowed, asking leave of no one.

Kanıkey dismounted, and her knees came down upon the earth. She stood in the midst of the empty camp and raised her lament; her voice was faint at first, then it widened like the steppe itself.

— My Keñ-Kol, she said, my Keñ-Kol in whose shade the herds once lay! Have your hearths gone cold since my kagan departed? Where is the war-cry of the forty companions, where the hoofbeat of Akkula? I was widowed at thirty-two, and you were widowed with me, Talas!

Then, as if entrusting them to the soil, she poured out one by one the secrets she had told no one for twelve years. She said that she had had Manas's body buried in secret at midnight, so that none might see, in the bosom of Keñ-Şor; that a plane tree had sprung up where the kagan was washed and a plane tree where he was buried, and that those trees had shot up in a single night by miracle. She told of the treasure too: how she had had the silver ingots, the golden harness, everything beyond price carried to a cave in the breast of Kızıl-Too; how she had offered kımız with her own hand to the five strongmen who dug the cave, had mixed poison into the kımız, and had buried all five at the foot of that mountain so the secret would be kept. Her voice did not tremble as she said it; only her eyes narrowed, like eyes gazing upon a very distant grief.

— The sin be upon my neck, she said. I did it so that Manas's bones would not be plundered. A kagan's secret is guarded with a kagan's blood.

Semetey listened to his mother; for twelve years he had grown up in Buhara at the table of his grandfather Temirkan, ignorant of his own lineage, and since learning the secret he had known every word of it like a sword. He walked among the empty camping grounds; he lifted a fallen hearthstone and set it back in its place, as though righting a wrong twelve years old. The wind blew from the Keñ-Kol, laying the reeds down and raising them again; and in that wind the boy heard a breath he recognized though he had never heard it — it was the breath of his father's homeland, and now it was his.

Semetey was twelve years old that day; he had only just grown tall enough to reach his father's stirrup, but his gaze was the gaze of old wolves. He came to the foot of Tört-Kül; there the vineyard Manas had once planted with his own hands still stood, the vines gone wild but not withered. Semetey drove the first stake beside the vineyard. A month did not pass, two months did not pass, before the grey yurts sprang up like mushrooms; the scattered clans came flowing in by ones and twos like an avalanche, and an encampment of

seven thousand households arose. When the people saw how the boy mounted a horse, how he held the whip, how he narrowed his eyes, they looked at one another and cried out:

— Manas has risen and come again! The dead kagan has returned!

The news walked from mountain to mountain. The sage Bakay, in his ninety-fifth year, was herding camels on the Beş-Taş pastures; his white beard had sunk to his chest, and the days of the khanate had turned to dream. When he heard the news he threw down his staff, handed the camel's halter to a shepherd, said, "A spark remains in the ember of Manas," and set out for Talas. Bölökbay the lame smith came down from Kayıpçı Mountain; he came with his bellows, his anvil, and his hammer on his back, saying, "A boy who will be a warrior needs a sword." The widowed ladies came too: Almambet's wife Burulça, with the orphan Külçoro at her breast; Çubak's wife Birmıskal, leading the orphan Kançoro by the hand. Two widows, two orphans, laid their heads upon the threshold of the encampment.

Kanıkey pressed the two orphans to her breast; she took them both upon her knee and nursed them, saying that the due of a mother's milk is the due of the whole people. From the breast Külçoro suckled came white milk, pure white, like snow. From the breast Kançoro suckled seeped blood, dark and red. Kanıkey's face turned to ash; she set the child down from her knee and drew her son aside.

— Semetey, she said, give ear to your mother. He who drinks white milk will be white-hearted toward you; he who drinks blood will one day drink your blood. Do not raise this Kançoro in your bosom.

Semetey laughed; he laughed with the laugh of twelve years, the laugh of those who still see the world only from its sunlit side.

— Mother, he said, they are both my kin. Almambet's son and Çubak's son are brothers to me. Does blood come from a brother?

Kanıkey fell silent; mothers know that some words, spoken before their time, wait in the earth like seed. That autumn they seated Semetey upon the white felt and raised him nine times; a golden crown was set upon his head, a golden throne drawn beneath him; from the mouths of Argın and Kırgız a single cry went up: Han Semetey. Bakay gave his blessing, Bölökbay cast iron enough for forty swords upon his anvil, and for the first time in twelve years the smoke of feasting rose over Talas.

That winter the old orator Baymırza died; he had been an elder honey-tongued and just of mind, and none there was who did not weep for him. His funeral feast was to be given; and at the council of the feast the talk wound round and came to Abıke and Köböş. Those two brigands, Manas's own half-brothers, who had laid hands upon his throne, his herds, and his honor before the kagan was cold, still sat with their camps, having gathered around them the forty companions and many a khan. Bakay stroked his white beard:

— Blood is not washed with blood, he said. Water washes blood. Let us send an envoy; let us summon them to Baymırza's funeral feast, and make peace for the dead man's sake. Let not the sword of the Kırgız be raised against the Kırgız.

Kanıkey stepped forward from behind the curtain; dignified, unbending.

— Bakay aga, she said, your heart is white, but I know their hearts. Kırgılçal has grown rabid with age; the forty companions have become dogs that forget their master's bones. They will not come to reason; they will devour the envoy's head.

She could not make them listen. The council stood with Bakay; Sarıkan of the bowl-round eyes was chosen for the embassy. Sarıkan mounted Tuuçunak, took the bundles of gifts under his arm, and came to the camp of the six brigands. He kept his words sweet: he bade them come to Baymırza's feast, presented the gifts, promised them a share of the khanate; for the sake of peace he did not shrink even from offering Kanıkey herself — the widow had consented to it, that the quarrel might die. But there sat before him an alliance sworn upon the Quran: the warrior Ürbü, Ümötöy son of Kökçö, Buyanbek son of Muzburçak, Alabek, and at their head Kırgılçal, with the forty companions behind him. They had sworn their oath once and for all: that the sword should not enter the sheath until the seed of Manas was withered. Words grew short, eyes grew dark; one reached for his sword, another cast a lasso.

Sarıkan was alone; around him were forty swords, behind him a hundred spears. But Sarıkan was of those who had eaten Manas's bread; he knew how to look death in the eye. He blinked his round eye once, wheeled his spear once. With the first thrust he brought down the warrior Ürbü; with the second he toppled Tazbaymat from his horse; with the third he pinned Kırgılçal, white-bearded chief of the forty companions, to the earth through the chest. Then he laid the whip to Tuuçunak's belly; arrows rained after him, they fired their guns, he was drenched in blood, but horse and rider became a single soul and reached Talas. Sarıkan rolled from the saddle at Kanıkey's feet:

— Lady, he said, your word was true. This is the answer to peace.

Kanıkey did not sleep that night. She opened the chests and brought out what she had kept for twelve years. She dressed Semetey in his father's battle gear: she drew the Akolpok, which no bullet could pierce, over his back, girded Zulpukor at his waist, put Akkelte into his hand, and led Taybuurul beneath him — from father to son, from tulpar to tulpar. She herself cast off her woman's dress; she put on a man's kaftan, gathered her hair inside a warrior's cap, shouldered the Sır musket left from Almambet, and climbed to the rampart of the fortress. Mother Çıyırdı, the seventy-year-old grandmother, carried arrows and measured powder.

The enemy came before the horizon paled; the host of Abıke and Köböş surrounded Talas on three sides. Dust touched the sky, hoofbeats hammered the earth; the thunder of the drums echoed from the skirts of the Ala-Too and rolled back again. The men of seven thousand households took their places on the ramparts and in the trenches; the women carried arrows, the children watered the horses. Death had come once more to the gate of Talas, but this time behind the gate stood the seed of Manas. Kanıkey took aim from the rampart; each time the Sır musket spoke, a saddle was emptied of its rider. Semetey drove Taybuurul forward; in the first charge he clove a company of a hundred in two, in the second he brought down the standard, in the third he tore out the enemy's heart. Before noon the brigand host was broken; the broken fled, and the fleeing were hunted down.

Köböş was among those who fled. Semetey in truth wished only to frighten him; he shouldered Akkelte and let the trigger fall as a warning. But Akkelte was Manas's gun; that gun never spoke in vain. The bullet found Köböş through the shoulder blade, and the brigand crashed from the saddle onto the stones. Semetey dismounted and stood over the fallen man; within him seethed a darkness he had never known till that day — the blood of the man who had sat upon his father's throne and driven his mother into exile now pooled at his very feet. He bent down; he took of the blood in his palm and drank it. Those who saw it shuddered; on that day, in that hour, his name went abroad: they called him the blood-drinker, the merciless — they called him so and loved him still, for the blood he drank was the vengeance of his own father.

He overtook Abıke on the banks of the Keñ-Kol. Abıke leapt from his horse and threw himself upon the ground:

— My nephew, son of the kagan, wolf-cub! I am a hunted old man; spare my blood, and let me be your slave!

— Did you spare my mother? said Semetey. You sat upon my father's throne before his forty days of mourning were done; you devoured the orphan's portion. I was the pleading orphan that day.

The spear came down; Abıke's pleading was cut short in the middle.

As for Cakıp — for grandfather Cakıp, the Cakıp who had eaten from one cauldron with his grandson's enemies while his son's corpse was not yet cold — his reckoning was settled by the women. Kanıkey and Çıyırdı, one the bride and one the mother, went in upon him together; no one heard what they said, only that they alone were seen to come out of the tent. Akılay too, the widow who had gone to Köböş's bed before Manas's forty days were done, gave up her life that day at Kanıkey's hand; and as Kanıkey wiped the sword she said one thing only:

— It was the reckoning of the kagan's bed, she said. It is paid.

The sword would have gone further still; Bakay stepped into its path. He spread both hands and seized the bridle of Semetey's horse:

— Enough, my lion, he said. The guilty have fallen; do not touch the guiltless. The people are like sheep; when the shepherd changes, the flock is not to blame. These are your people; these are the ones who will die for you tomorrow.

Semetey thrust the sword into its sheath. The guiltless people were pardoned; the forty companions piled up their weapons and stretched out their necks, kneeling and saying, "Kill or pardon." Evening came over Talas; the night wind took the smell of blood and carried it away.

✦ ✦ ✦

Semetey pardoned the forty companions. The sword does not fall on a bowed neck, he said; he seated them at his table and clothed each one in a kaftan. Then he rose to his feet before the throne and turned his face to the sunrise, toward far Beecin:

— My father's blood shall not lie unavenged upon the earth, he said. Until I take Konurbay's head, my bed is forbidden me, my sleep is forbidden me. I will carry holy war to Beecin; let this be my oath.

And he counted out, one by one, the heavy reckoning of Çoñ-Beecin, while the council listened in silence: Almambet remained on that campaign; Sırgak remained on that

campaign; Akkula, tulpar of tulpars, fell on that campaign with a broken wing; Çubak wandered long with his wounds and then vanished from the earth. As he counted, Burulça wept, Birmıskal wept, and none there was who did not weep. After the mourning came the feast; six hundred grey mares were slaughtered, the cauldrons boiled, Talas made merry for forty days; the bards sang of Manas, the young men raced their horses, the old men said, "Praise be, the hearth still smokes."

But under the ember there was live coal. Before the feast had scattered, before the soot of the cauldrons had cooled, the whispering began. Koçkor and Çıybıt, sons of Cakıp's younger wife Bakdöölöt, had not forgotten their grandfather's blood; not daring to bare their teeth openly, they loosed whispers among the forty companions. "Kanıkey will poison you," they said; "Kırgılçal's vengeance will fall on you," they said; "this blood-drinking boy will one day drink your blood as well," they said. Slander goes to the head like kımız; one night the forty companions took horse and fled to seek refuge with Konurbay.

Semetey set out after them alone. He overtook them; and when he overtook them he drew no sword, raised no whip — he dismounted, took off his own halter and put it around his own neck, and walked before the forty men:

— Let me be your sacrifice, forty elders! Shadows of my father, wings of my father! If I raise my hand against you, may my hand wither. Turn back; Talas is no homeland without you.

Stone itself would have melted; they turned back. Semetey feasted them anew, gave them their portions anew, seated them anew in the place of honor. Kanıkey drew her son aside once more:

— Do not keep them together, she said. Scatter them; send them one by one to distant lands, to the marches. If forty heads boil in one cauldron, it will boil over again.

Again Semetey did not listen. And the forty companions, on a Friday night, fled a second time; they crossed the Kötörmö, passed Suusamır, struck out for Kızart. This time too Semetey went after them; he cut them off in the valley of Koçkor, leaned down from his horse, and pleaded one last time:

— Elders, I will not ask a third time; turn back, and I will double your portion.

The faces of the forty men were stone. One among them — which one it was, no one afterward wished to remember — leveled his gun. The answer was not a word. The answer was a bullet, an arrow, an axe; a bullet grazed Semetey's cap, an arrow lodged in his shield.

In that instant, the darkness that had seethed in him the day he drank Köböş's blood seethed once more, and this time it overflowed. Zulpukor left the sheath; the gold-cheeked battle-axe wheeled in the air. The valley was narrow, there was nowhere to flee; Semetey, in his accursed fury, cut down all forty. Then he dismounted and stood alone in the midst of the forty dead; when the fury ebbed, a grief cold as ice took its place. These had been his father's forty comrades; they had eaten from one cauldron with Manas, bled from one wound with him.

Bakay came riding up; he saw the dead, and tears ran down his white beard, but he did not blame the boy.

— What is done is done, he said. At least let their bones not lie in the open. A warrior deserves a tomb.

Sart master-builders were brought from Kızıl; forty tombs were raised for the forty men, forty domes ranged side by side. From that day to this they call that valley Koçkor; it takes its name from the men who clashed there like rams and were broken. When the shadows of the tombs grew long, Semetey returned to Talas; Argın and Kırgız with one voice proclaimed him sultan over them. The bards recited the chain of the lineage: from Böyönkan onward, from Cakıp to Manas, from Manas to Semetey — the seed had not withered, the hearth had not gone out.

Semetey the sultan still had his eye on Beecin; but one did not go to Beecin alone; kinsmen and allies were needed. At Kebez-Too sat Çınkoco, son of Şıgay; hoping that kinship might yield its share, an embassy was fitted out to him. Bakay at its head, Ormonbek at his side, behind them the two orphans — Külçoro and Kançoro, now come to their twelfth year — they set out with six spare horses and a letter. They arrived, gave greeting, presented the letter. Çınkoco struck the letter against his knee without reading it; his face was vinegar, his tongue poison:

— Who does Semetey think he is? he said. An orphan of tainted blood, raised at a Sart's door in Buhara — how should I count him a man, how should I muster at his call? Go and tell him: let him keep his throne, and his campaign too.

The words struck Bakay's white beard, and Ormonbek's hand went to his hilt; but the true stroke of the game was played by twelve-year-old Külçoro. The boy slipped quietly outside; he found Kara, Çınkoco's own mount, and threw him down, branded his haunch with the red-hot Ogoy iron, and cut his ear with his knife — "this is the mark set upon

tribute goods," he said. Then he went in and stood before Çınkoco; his voice was a child's voice, his words a kagan's words:

— I demand the tribute you have withheld from my father Manas these twelve years. The one you call tainted of blood is a kagan's son; it is not your blood that is tainted, but your tongue.

Çınkoco rose roaring to his feet; and even as he rose, Külçoro's whip came down upon his crown. The great khan toppled like a log and lost his senses. The companions burst outside; the cry of "Manas!" rang among the rocks of Kebez-Too; Çınkoco's uncounted herds were driven before them, and in a storm of dust they poured onto the road to Talas. The embassy returned with its tribute.

When Çınkoco came to himself, his world had gone dark. He was a man whose wit was shorter than his wrath; finding no warrior on whom to spend his spite, he spent it on his own stock — he had his ram gelded, his bull gelded, his camel-stallion gelded; "Let Semetey have neither offspring nor seed," he raved, and no one dared to laugh. Then he pulled up his whole camp and migrated to Ceti-Özön, taking refuge with Toltoy son of Bagış, khan of the Cediger. There six heads came together: Çınkoco, Toltoy, black-bearded Tölök, Tölöbay, Kalça, Kadırbay. The muzzle of the gun was kissed, the sword was licked, and an oath was sworn unto death.

And Çınkoco began to hollow out Toltoy's heart; his whisper coiled like a snake:

— Toltoy, he said, Çaçıkey was yours to take; Semetey took her, and you kept silent. But he too has a cradle-betrothed: the daughter of Akun Han, the white swan Ayçürök. At Kökötöy's funeral feast Manas and Akun Han made themselves kinsmen; one said "if I have a son," the other said "if I have a daughter," and they pledged them while still in the cradle. Now if you take Ayçürök, you will both draw out your own grief and press a stone upon the orphan's heart. A reckoning for a reckoning, a girl for a girl!

The more Toltoy's heart was hollowed, the larger it grew, and the larger it grew, the darker. The Cediger host was mustered; the drums were beaten, the standards raised, and the army marched upon the land of Oogan. Akun Han's fortress was surrounded; from beneath the walls a single cry went up: "Give us Ayçürök!" Black-bearded Tölök, in the garb of a marriage envoy, was sent to the fortress gate with a letter of threats.

✦ ✦ ✦

Akun Han's fortress had walls of ninety fathoms; a thousand strongmen kept watch on its ramparts, and its gate was of bronze. But Akun Han's true fortress was his mind. He read the letter Tölök brought; he read it, and did not grow angry, but smiled. The old khan knew: against an army like a mountain one stands not with the sword but with time.

— Kinsmen let us be, by all means, he said to Tölök. But giving a daughter is not like selling a mare; it wants preparation, it wants a trousseau. I ask a term of eighty days. And since Toltoy is a man of valor, no gift should come unmanned: let Çınkoco's Kara horse and Toltoy's Surkoen come to me as presents; and for the bride-price I ask seven hundred chestnut horses. If these come, a word is a word.

Tölök carried back this answer. Toltoy knit his brows, Çınkoco foamed; but Kalça and Kadırbay pressed them, saying, "What is a horse beside the girl?" — and the besieging army, counting out its eighty days, settled down to wait. Akun Han meanwhile walked the ramparts by night, gazing at the stars, hoping fate would open some door. Eighty days was no small span; in eighty days many a throne had toppled, many a fate had turned.

But the one who truly took fate in hand was his daughter. Ayçürök had been pledged in the cradle; at Kökötöy's great funeral feast Manas and Akun Han had sealed their word at the table and written their unborn children each to the other. And Ayçürök was of peri blood besides; a saint born of woman, a white swan initiated into the secret of passing from shape to shape. In the dark days of the siege she stood one evening before her father; her voice was soft, her resolve was iron:

— Father, she said, rather than bow to that fool Toltoy and be his woman, better that I die wandering in search of a true man. Seventy of the eighty days will suffice me; I shall test the heroes of the earth with my own eyes.

It was the Night of Power; the gates of heaven stood ajar, the road of prayers lay open. Ayçürök put on her white swan plumage; her maiden skin turned to feather, her arms became wings, and from the fortress rampart she glided out into the night. She rose, and rose; the moonlight struck her wing, and below her the siege fires dwindled to embers of coal.

First she came to Kaşkar: the one they called Kañşıbek was a merchant who drove mules and counted goods. She came to Ancıyan: Sıncıbek was the same, the tongue of his scales longer than the tongue of his heart. Malabek of Margalañ was a muleteer too; all

three were tradesmen, not warriors. She looked upon Bilerik, son of Aykoco: his face was fair but womanish, his sword-sheath a thing of ornament. She flew to the warrior Töştük, son of Eleman: the giant hero who had once descended beneath the earth and returned was nearing seventy, his battles turned to fireside tales. She saw Koşoy: old age had set its ladder against the face of that mountain of a champion and was climbing him down step by step. She sought the warrior Ürbü; Ürbü was long dead, and Ayçürök only circled once above his empty camp. She tested Ümötöy son of Kökçö: his name was warrior, himself a coward; when the swan's shadow fell across him he started and fled into his tent. She saw Mıradıl too, and found him wanting also. Upon all the earth that passed beneath her wing there was a famine of men.

Last of all she came to Beecin. She wheeled above Beecin and saw Konurbay in his ninety-fifth year: even in old age his shoulders were like fortress gates, his gaze like a knife. Ayçürök trembled within herself; she said to herself: Were he not of Kıtay, here were a man worth having. But in that instant the cunning Kalça lifted his head to the sky; he sensed in the swan's gliding something that was not of birds, and cried out, "This swan is no swan — it is a woman in swan's plumage!" He leveled his Oçogor musket and fired; the bullet seared through her wing feathers. Bows were bent, arrows whistled; Kalça leapt upon winged Algara and gave chase — that horse raced with the sky more than with the earth. Ayçürök fought for her life; she recited the weather-spell of the peri line, loosed mist upon the sky, and behind the mist hail burst forth, and behind the hail a downpour. Heaven was thrown into tumult, the earth vanished from sight; and in that confusion Ayçürök barely slipped free and escaped.

On weary wings she turned west; she passed over the pastures of Suusamır, crossed the Kötörmö, and glided out above Talas. And she could not believe what she saw: a land of exile, they had called it, a land of orphans — yet below her the smoke of seven thousand hearths was rising, the horse-herds surged like seas, and a prospering people laughed and sang. She dropped low over the great tomb of Manas; alighting beside the dome she took on human form, veiled her face, and recited a prayer:

— You would have been my father the kagan, she said; I did not come in time to see you living, so I have come to your spirit. I have come to your son; I have come to my betrothed.

Then she became a swan again and glided along the Keñ-Kol, and she saw Semetey. And the moment she saw him she knew him — not to know him was impossible: around

the young man circled the forty çilten; at his right lay a black-spotted tiger, at his left stretched a maimed, grey-maned lion; behind him a dragon in the likeness of a white serpent lay coiled in a ring, and above his head the Zumuruk bird spread its wings. The young man saw none of these; in the midst of the host he could not see, he was casting from his wrist and calling back the white falcon — Akşumkar, his father's legacy. Ayçürök's heart fluttered in her breast like a bird: This is the one I sought, she said; this is the one written to me in the cradle. I saw the merchant of Kaşkar — not worth this man; I saw Konurbay of Beecin — no match for this man. I have circled the face of the earth, I have sifted all that lies beneath the sky; and behold, this is what a man is.

But between them stood a wife: Çaçıkey, Semetey's wedded lady. Ayçürök chose the straight path; taking a girl's form she barred Çaçıkey's way on the banks of the Keñ-Kol and knelt before her:

— Elder sister, she said, I have come to be your servant. Take me as a second wife; six days of the week be yours, and six mine — nay, I will forgo my portion altogether, only let me shelter in your shadow. I was pledged to him in the cradle; Toltoy has besieged my gate, and I have fled here with my life.

Çaçıkey's face first went blank with astonishment, then hardened, then darkened.

— Who are you, and who is my husband! she hissed. Be off to wherever you came from! Runaway of Oogan, botched mockery of a swan — have you no shame, seeking a share in my bed? Out of my sight, beggar!

A heavy word is like a wound from a stone; it does not heal. Ayçürök straightened; the pleading was wiped from her face, and in its place came the cold light of the peri line. She stooped, took up a handful of earth; she spoke over it, breathed upon it, and cast the ensorcelled earth over Çaçıkey. The pampered lady crumpled where she stood; a black fit seized her body, six days and six nights she lay senseless, and only on the seventh day did she find her tongue. And the moment she found it, a terror settled into her; like one raving she said only a single thing: the bird... let him not cast the bird...

On the day she rose, she came before Semetey's horse and clung to his stirrup:

— My lord, cast no bird for seven days, she begged. For seven days take not Akşumkar upon your wrist; my dream is black, my heart is black. Let seven days pass, then do as you will.

Semetey was not a man to forgo the hunt at a woman's word; moreover, since Çaçıkey's six-day swoon his heart had been full of suspicion toward her. The lady had not told the truth of the fit; of the swan, of the second wife, of the ensorcelled earth she had said not one word, only harping on "cast no bird." A half-truth is worse than a whole lie; Semetey's suspicion turned to wrath. His brows knotted, his whip rose; he left the pleading lady bleeding across the shoulder and back.

— No woman meddles in a man's road, he said. Rise, and out of my way.

And taking Külçoro and Kançoro with him, with fourteen swift horses he rode out to Ala-Köl to hunt swans. The lake was a mirror; the reeds were yellow, the water the color of lead. They had not gone far when they saw a single white swan upon the lake — such a swan that its gliding was not the gliding of a bird but the walking of a bride. A light dawned in Külçoro's breast; he edged his horse close to Semetey's:

— Aga, he said, do not shoot this swan; do not cast the falcon at this swan. This bird is come from Mecca; this is a marvel that passes from shape to shape. What my eye sees is not a wing; behind the wing there is a secret. Let it go.

— Have you turned mullah at twelve? laughed Semetey. It is a swan; swans are for taking.

And he shook his wrist; Akşumkar, his father's legacy, shot forth swifter than an arrow. The swan fled, the falcon pursued; two white wings tangled together over the lake. The swan rose, the falcon climbed higher; the swan dove into the reeds, the falcon wheeled above her. Three times the swan fled, three times her way was cut off; on the fourth, Akşumkar dropped like a stone, stretched the swan out at the marsh's edge, perched upon her breast, and waited on his short leash. Had Ayçürök wished it, she could have loosed the ground-mist at the very start and escaped; but she had not wished it — to be caught by her betrothed's bird was itself a meeting, and the peri maiden had drawn the path of that meeting in her own way. Semetey spurred his horse; but before he could reach them, a ground-mist rose from the marsh — white, thick, enchanted. Within the mist the outstretched swan arose; a girl's hand reached out and snatched Akşumkar by his short leash; and as the mist drew up into the sky, the swan, the falcon, and the secret vanished into the heavens with it.

Semetey stood turned to stone at the lake's edge; then the stone cracked, and lightning came out of it. The waters of Ala-Köl shivered at his roar:

— Akşumkar! The one wing left me of my father! For his sake I will wander the eighteen thousand worlds; I will sift all that lies beneath the vault of heaven through a sieve, and if I return to Talas without finding my falcon, may my name as a man wither!

Külçoro held his peace; he held it, because this was no place to say "I told you." As Semetey cooled, Çaçıkey's pleading came back to his mind: she had said, cast no bird for seven days; so she had known, so the thread of this matter led to her. He turned his horse's head:

— Külçoro, Kançoro! Ride to the encampment and ask Çaçıkey: let her tell where the falcon is. If she tells, I swear it — never again will I lay the whip on her, never will I take a second wife over her. My word is my word; bear witness.

The two companions galloped off; they came to Talas, to the encampment. Kançoro stood at the door and Külçoro walked in; he gave greeting from the threshold and came before the lady:

— Sister-in-law, he said, my aga has sworn an oath; if you tell where the falcon is...

He could not finish. Çaçıkey, her whip-wounds still throbbing, brimming with the terror and rancor of her six-day fit, rose from her place in such a fury that the felt of the tent trembled:

— Out of my sight! she shrieked. Vanish from my eyes, orphan's whelp! Take neither the greeting of the aga who left me drenched in blood, nor your own self! The falcon? Let your aga go and seek it where he lost it!

Külçoro drew back from the threshold; before the door his eyes met Kançoro's, and both were silent. Outside, the sun was sinking behind the Ala-Too; the west was crimson, the color of blood. As Külçoro mounted his horse he lifted his head to the sky: in the empty heavens there was not a single bird, yet far in the depths, beyond the clouds, it was as if the echo of a wingbeat lingered. He wondered what he would say to his aga; and within himself he knew that at this news Semetey's lightning would flash once more, and that the road of that lightning — the road of the white swan who had seized the falcon — would run out from Talas all the way to Ürgönç.

CHAPTER 20

On the Trail of Akşuñkar and the Wedding at Ürgönç

— ❖ —

In those days a secret had settled over Talas; over the mornings when the kımız was milked, over the steppe that woke to the whinnying of the herds, a secret heavy as soot sunk into felt, a secret that would not come to words. Akşuñkar was gone. The white falcon left from Manas, the hunting bird with the golden jesses, had vanished from the sky one night without warning, leaving behind neither feather nor trace. And on the morning after that night, a strange light had kindled in the eyes of Çaçıkey, who sat behind the iron gate of her white palace; whoever saw it understood that the thread of her reason had snapped.

The first blood of that madness was very nearly Külçoro's. As the boy, in the freshness of his twelve years, was crossing the palace courtyard, Çaçıkey had glided upon him like a shadow, Kanıkey's white dagger in her hand, the glitter of death in her eye, and had lunged for the child's throat. With one bound Külçoro had flung himself aside, seized the mane of Akborçuk, who stood saddled in the courtyard, flown onto the horse's back, and barely

burst out through the iron gate. The dagger hurled after him had rung against the stone, and the madwoman's laughter had gone circling round and round the walls.

— The white dagger was at my throat, said Külçoro, kneeling before Kanıkey, gasping for breath. It was your dagger, ene. With your own dagger she tried to cut my throat.

Kanıkey's face turned to stone. That dignified woman — Kanıkey, who had buried the mourning of Manas in her heart, who had clawed her way through the exile years of Buhara tooth and nail — felt something break within her when she heard that her dagger had reached for a child's throat.

— My dagger was stolen from me, she said slowly. Then the secret of Akşuñkar lies behind that iron gate. The mad know, and the mad tell. She must be made to tell.

First they tried gentleness. Bakay the sage went at their head; Bakay whose white beard fell to his chest, whose word was honey, whose counsel was a mountain. With him went Sarıkan of the bowl-round eyes and Camgırçı of the Eştek; and they took the chief ladies too — Körpöcan, Tınımkan, Caynake — that woman might prevail with woman and the iron gate be opened by goodwill. Six of them, according to the custom of embassies, came with kımız and sweet words to Çaçıkey's white palace.

The gate opened, opened indeed; but what came out from within were curses to make even the most weathered old camel of the steppe blush. Çaçıkey, her hair wild about her, her eyes two live coals, spoke as if spitting upon the envoys. She reviled Bakay's white beard; she cursed Sarıkan's line and lineage; she hurled unspeakable words at the ladies. Camgırçı's hand went to his battle-axe, but Bakay stayed it.

— No sword is raised against the mad, said Bakay, his voice full of sorrow. But this madness is not the madness we know; there is a knot within it. Let us turn back; the hand that will untie this knot is another hand.

They turned back; they turned back with darkened faces and wounded hearts. Kanıkey heard them all, and as she listened her brows drew together, and as they drew together the whole encampment turned to ice. At last she rose to her feet; her voice was low, but it was iron.

— For a woman who curses the white-bearded, who drives the chief ladies from her door, who holds a dagger to a child's throat, the road of goodwill is now closed. Külçoro! You who fled from her dagger, you shall break down her door. Take the whip. Do not slacken your hand until she pours out the secret.

The twelve-year-old boy hesitated a moment; then he thrust his whip into his belt, mounted Akborçuk, and set himself against the iron gate. At three kicks the gate groaned; at the fifth it tore from its hinges. Çaçıkey met him with curses; the whip whistled in the air. He struck once, and the woman howled; he struck twice, and the woman called down curses; at the third stroke Çaçıkey's tongue was loosed, the veil of madness ripped as cloth rips, and the secret burst forth like matter from a wound.

— Stop, strike no more! I will tell... No bird took Akşuñkar — a bird took him! A girl in the plumage of a white swan came, glided down from the sky, seized the falcon in her talons, and flew away! That girl is the daughter of Akun Han, Ayçürök of the peri line! Manas and Akun Han made their pact while the children were still in the cradle, notched the betrothal-mark; the girl is pledged to Semetey! She came to me as a guest, asked six days' guest-right, and I drove her out; so she took Akşuñkar and flew to the land of Oogan, to her father's city! That is the secret, that is the blood, that is my affliction!

When Kanıkey received the news she was silent a long while. They brought back her white dagger; the woman weighed it in her palm, then laid it down upon the felt. So the falcon had gone for the sake of a girl; so Manas's oath lived on after him, and the word sealed in the cradle was returning on a falcon's wing. Through her passed both an ache and a hope: her son was of age, and alone; peri or swan, he needed a companion for his hearth.

When the word reached the encampment, Semetey rose up from where he sat; something within his heart cracked, as a river frozen through the winter cracks in April. He cried out his father's name, that single-syllabled heaven, at the top of his voice:

— Manas!

The war-cry struck the mountains and came rolling back. That day the froth of the kımız overflowed in the encampment, the grooms ran to the stables, the cooks filled their skins. Semetey finished his preparations for the road in three days: he took Külçoro and Kançoro at his side, added six grooms and four cooks; a company of twenty-five was formed, and fourteen tulpars were loaded. Kanıkey kissed her son's brow, Bakay recited a blessing after him, and the company, leaving the willows of Talas behind, took the road of Oogan, southward.

Three days and three nights they rode; they crossed mountains, trampled sands, wound through passes. By day the sun scorched upon the heights, by night the frost worked into their bones; at the halting places the cooks set up their cauldrons, and the grooms wiped the sweat from the tulpars with felt. Semetey spoke little; his eye was always

southward, as if beyond the horizon a voice were calling him by name that only he could hear. When they reached Karı-Kıya and made camp, the evening red had dyed the steppe the color of blood. The next day they climbed the ridge of Agınek; and here Semetey drew from the bottom of his saddlebag a heavy object wrapped in felt: the fabled spyglass, booty of Manas's Kokon campaign, that gathered seven days' road into a handsbreadth. He set the lens to his eye; first dust and haze, then the road, then domes: the city of Akun Han, with its minarets and its gardens, came into the hollow of his hand. He turned the lens slowly; the Çoñ-Ürgönç river appeared, flowing in winding coils; then the plain of Ak-Kıya, and in the middle of the plain a gathering: thirty brides, thirty maidens, swings, garments of red and green. And at the very center of that gathering, one who swayed like the moon slipping free of a cloud.

Semetey's hand trembled. The spyglass grew heavy; the world itself grew heavy. He had seen Ayçürök; before her name had left his tongue he had written it upon his heart. One look sufficed; love, like a wolf, took him by the throat in a single spring.

— A vanguard is needed, he said, his voice thick. A companion to watch the pass, to learn the way of the water and the mouth of the city. Kançoro, you go.

Kançoro was standing beside his horse; he twisted his face and spoke as if spitting:

— Am I your slave, am I your chattel to be driven before you? Shall I leap into floods and scrape along cliffs for the sake of a lord who has glimpsed a girl? See to your own business yourself.

A silence fell over the company; only the wind laid down and lifted the dry grasses of the Agınek ridge. Semetey said not a word; but in that instant the window of his heart that looked toward Kançoro closed, and never again did anything warm pass through that window. Meanwhile Külçoro had dismounted and come forward, his head bowed.

— My lord, I am your servant, he said. I was raised on the bread of Kanıkey ene; I have walked in your shadow. I will go into the flood, into the fire. Give me leave; let me go.

Semetey's eyes filled; inwardly he set the two boys side by side, one on the scale of treachery, one on the scale of faith. With his own hands he drew the Akolpok armor, Manas's legacy, over Külçoro's back; he had Taybuurul led up, the tulpar born of the wind-peri; and when the boy vaulted astride, the horse neighed and the earth groaned.

— To Ürgönç, said Semetey. See the water, see the pass; and if you see the girl, do not lose your heart. Go now, and may your road be open.

Taybuurul sprang into a gallop; the hoofbeats went down from Agınek toward the heart of the steppe like a drum, sinking, sinking, fading away.

✦ ✦ ✦

Ayçürök knew the young hero was coming; and not content with knowing, she wished to test him. The daughter of the peri line, Ayçürök whom Kıdır had touched seven times, went down to the river's edge, opened her palms to the sky, and recited prayers in Arabic; and as her words touched the water, the water swelled. The Çoñ-Ürgönç first muttered, then roared, then went mad. Pines were torn up by the roots, boulders big as houses rolled and were buried in the foam, whirlpools opened and closed, spinning like the angels of death. It was not a river that flowed, but the wrath of the world.

When Külçoro reached the bank, even Taybuurul gave back a step. For a moment the boy's heart was crushed; this is water, he said within himself, and one does not wrestle with water. He turned his rein and rode three paces back. At that very moment, from the far shore, piercing the roar of the flood, came a thin sound: the laughter of girls swinging on swings. Thirty maidens, thirty brides, were flying on silken swings, playing and laughing at the very edge of death. Külçoro's face caught fire. In Talas they laugh at the hero who turns back — and what would Kanıkey ene say of a companion who fled? He swelled his chest and hurled the war-cry of the fathers at the sky:

— Manas!

And he flung himself into the flood. The water swallowed him, spun him, beat him; Taybuurul swam, sank, rose again. Just as the whirlpool was about to drag the boy under, unseen hands touched his shoulder: the forty çilten spread their wings, Hızır İlyas parted the water, from the sky came down the shadow of the zümrüdüanka, skimming the foam aside with its wing. The water wrapped round him like a giant serpent, loosened, wrapped again; the boy's mouth filled with foam, his ears with roaring. But Taybuurul was born of the wind-peri; water was kin to him on his mother's side, as it were, and even in the wildest whirlpool he never lost his footing. Külçoro caught hold of a spine of rock, then another, then another; and at last he came out on the far shore — not onto mud, but onto silken carpets spread out for him. Ayçürök had had the carpets laid with her own hands, so that the coming hero should not set his wet foot upon bare earth.

The girl received him standing; but her tongue was not honey, it was a needle.

— Who are you, and whose whelp? she said. By your stature you are fresh out of the cradle. I have suitors already; Çınkoco son of Şıgay and Toltoy of the Cediger wait in line at my gate. From which wedding are you the leavings?

Külçoro was fresh from the water, his breath not yet steadied; but he did not let the word fall into the water.

— I am an ember of the hearth of Manas, he said. I open the road for my lord Semetey. If Çınkoco is your bridegroom, why was the flood conjured, why are the carpets spread? If Toltoy is your betrothed, for whom did you seize the falcon — on whose arm shall Akşuñkar perch?

Word struck against word and scattered sparks; the girl pricked, the boy stoned; at last Ayçürök laughed, and with her laughter the curtain fell and the truth poured out.

— You speak truly; you are an ember, she said. Listen, then. I am a girl pledged in the cradle; Manas and my father Akun Han swore their oath while we were both still in swaddling. I waited for my betrothed to grow; and not content with waiting, I put on my white swan plumage and flew across the whole world, seeking him. I came down to Talas too; I knocked at Çaçıkey's door, asked six days' guest-right; she drove me off, thrust me from her gate. So I took my revenge by the custom of birds: I seized Akşuñkar as he soared over Ala-Köl, as a hawk takes its prey, and brought him here. The falcon lives; he sits on a golden-chained perch. Let my betrothed come, and take his falcon — and take me.

Külçoro's heart filled with light; but the games of the Ürgönç shore were sweet, the laughter of the girls was honey; the boy forgot to send word one day, forgot a second day. The swing was hung, horses were raced, and Külçoro lived three days of his childhood there, on that plain.

On the ridge of Agınek, meanwhile, the spyglass was pouring its own poison into its master. Semetey had not taken the lens from his eye; and what he saw at the end of the lens sent the blood to his head: Külçoro, his own Külçoro, in the midst of thirty girls, at Ayçürök's knee, laughing and playing. Jealousy, like an ember dropped in dry grass, engulfed him in an instant.

— Bring up the horses! he thundered. Load the packs! Heed neither night nor day!

The fourteen tulpars were driven night and day; the company did not sleep, food went uneaten, kımız was drunk in snatches. Semetey flew at the head, his eye bloodshot, his rein

taut. Ayçürök sensed him from afar; the peri eye, that ancient sight descended from the line of Celmoguz, saw the wrathful hero's road before he came. If he enters the flood in this fury he will drown, she said within herself; she stretched out the hand that Kıdır had touched seven times over the water and recited a prayer. And the Çoñ-Ürgönç, the raging Çoñ-Ürgönç, shivered before all eyes, drew back, ran dry; the last trickles bound themselves in ice, and the bed of the flood turned to naked stone.

When Semetey plunged into the riverbed, Zulpukor was at his waist; he clove the water's last resisting veil with his sword and sprang to the far shore. His first act was to scald Külçoro; he drove the boy before him and beat him with words:

— I sent you to open a road, not to weave games! Is your lord's love a thing to be hung on the rope of a swing? For shame!

Külçoro bowed his head and said not a word; the fault was his, and he knew it. Then Semetey turned to Ayçürök; his chest rose and fell like a bellows.

— My cradle-betrothed, my pledged one! he said. The oath of my father Manas and your father Akun Han is upon your neck. Come!

And he held out his hand. But Ayçürök was a peri's daughter, and her dignity stood taller than her stature; she drew back a step and lifted her head.

— The oath is upon my neck; I do not deny it, she said. But I am no falcon to be snatched as prey; what comes by custom is taken by custom. Have patience.

Patience, in that hour, was not in Semetey's store. The ember of jealousy still burned in him; he took the girl's reserve not for maidenly grace but for scorn; and from his mouth poured words that would afterward scald his own heart: he cursed her birdhood for wearing swan's plumage, cast stones at her lineage for being peri-born, hurled insults not to be spoken. Ayçürök's eyes brimmed, but her voice did not tremble; she too poured out her heart, counting it all over:

— I, faithless? I, who watched your road for years! Buyanbek came, and I turned him away; Ümötöy came — did I not show him the door? Coşo begged, Muradıl heaped up herds, even the name of Koñurbay came to my gate; all of them, all of them I refused for your sake! I flew the world over as a bird, I was driven from Çaçıkey's door, I tended your falcon like my own life! Is it I who am faithless, or you?

Two fires blazed face to face; and between them, from either side, stepped the two companions. Kançoro caught Semetey's bridle and spoke slowly into his ear; Külçoro knelt

before Ayçürök, added his own guilt to the plea for the girl's sake, and softened her with sweet words. The anger was like a steppe rain: it burst, it flooded, and then all at once it ceased. Semetey was ashamed, Ayçürök forgave; on the river's bank, on the fresh mud of the withdrawn waters, the first feast was laid; sheep were slaughtered, kımız was poured, and two hearts came together like the two banks of a river.

Then Ayçürök took the company of twenty-five behind her; leaving no trace, by the bird's precipice, by the peri's road, she led them to her white palace in Kara-Şaar. And there a wedding was held, with eighty maidens and eighty young men in attendance, such as the land of Oogan had never seen: for three days and three nights, when the drum fell silent the komuz spoke, and when the komuz fell silent, the singer of Manas; horses raced, champions wrestled, gold rained down. Akşuñkar was loosed from his golden chain and perched upon Semetey's arm; the falcon knew his master, beat his wings, and filled the encampment with his cry.

On the third night of the wedding Semetey and Ayçürök were left alone; the young lord begged pardon once more for the black words that had spilled from his mouth on the riverbank. Ayçürök laughed; you were like a flood, she said; a flood swells, foams, and then grows still; I know the ways of water. And looking toward the falcon's perch she added: I stole Akşuñkar away, but it seems I was the one truly taken; thus does fate lead the hunter to his prey.

But on the steppe the law is exact: when the jar of joy is full, the hand of fate reaches out. On the evening of the seventh day, rider upon rider came from the border; the news they brought fell upon the wedding fire like snow. The seven days' grace that Ayçürök had once given to stall her suitors had run out; Çınkoco son of Şıgay and Toltoy of the Cediger had come down with a host whose end no eye could see, to demand Ayçürök, and had laid siege to Akun Han's city. On the plain tent touched tent, and the fires kindled by night burned like a second starry sky. Akun Han turned pale and wasted; no way appeared to delay the war but to send out envoys. Acıbay, an orator whose tongue was legend, and the formidable Tümönbay were chosen; forty red camels and eighty-eight grey camels were strung into a gift-train, and the two envoys, herds before them, set out for the heart of the siege, toward the Cediger camp.

✦ ✦ ✦

In the Cediger camp, an embassy was a shirt of fire to wear. When Acıbay and Tümönbay were brought into the great tent, Toltoy's face was a black cloud; he took their greeting by halves and cut their speech off at the start:

— Six times you have deceived me, Acıbay! he said. Six times you lulled me with your honeyed tongue, six times I turned back empty-handed! Have you brought word again, or water under the straw? I say we storm the city this day; let us leave no stone upon stone, no head upon shoulders!

Çınkoco made a sign with his hand; he was older in years than Toltoy, and his word weighed heavier.

— There is no death for an envoy, and there is an ear for words, he said. Let him speak.

Acıbay rose to his feet; he was an orator, a herdsman who drove the whole horse-herd of language before him; he began, and the inside of the tent went deaf to everything but his voice. First he spoke the truth; yes, we stalled you, he said; the girl's heart was not ready, and term was added to term. Then he lowered his voice, and with that low voice he cast a shadow into the tent:

— But hear me now. Behind Çürök a protector has appeared. The seed of Manas, the nursling of Kanıkey, hidden and raised in Bukar, who learned his lineage at twelve and returned to Talas: Semetey. Abıke and Köböş, those two traitors, he overthrew beside the throne. Six thousand men of Kokon he broke at a single stroke. His father's Akkelte is on his shoulder, Zulpukor at his waist. Whoever would have the girl, let him first pass his spear. I am an envoy, and I tell what I have seen: the mere shadow of that boy scatters armies.

Çınkoco flew into a rage; he kicked the hide he sat upon and stood up.

— Who is Semetey?! he roared. His father is dead, his hearth is scattered, his companions cut down! Ayçürök is my widow; the custom of a girl whose betrothed has died falls to me! I will not wait seven days — not seven breaths!

Tümönbay was an envoy too, but his tongue was no envoy's tongue; he answered Çınkoco's words with such a curse that the tent-poles themselves were shamed. In an instant the battle-axes were bared, iron glared at iron; the warriors of the Cediger and the envoys' retinue set chest against chest. Blood was a nail's breadth from spilling when Acıbay threw himself between the two furies and spread wide his arms:

— The blood of an envoy brings ill luck upon a camp! Hold! I swear an oath; may my seven forefathers be counted infidels if within seven days I do not deliver Çürök to the bridegroom Toltoy with my own hands! Seven days! If at the end of seven days the girl does not come, burn the city, and throw me into the flames!

The oath was heavy, and the battle-axes came down. Toltoy growled, Çınkoco spat; but the seven days turned back once more from the sword's edge. The two envoys got out of the camp alive with much ado; the camels stayed behind, and their lives went before them.

On the road back, behind a dune of sand, a figure in a white veil rose before them: Ayçürök, fresh out of her bird plumage, was waiting for them. The two envoys' horses shied; the girl laughed.

— Do not fear; I have come to show you the way, she said. If you would have me wed, know my bride-price: under Toltoy is Surkoen, under Çınkoco the Kara horse. Demand both as the bride-price; wring them loose and bring them. The hero who gives up his tulpar has given up his life; an army left without horses is a snake left without a head. Leave the rest to me.

Then she went on before them; leaving no trace, by the shortest way, she brought them into Kara-Şaar, into her white palace. As they entered the courtyard the two envoys' knees gave way beneath them: before the palace, in the stable-yard, stood fourteen tulpars; but to their eyes they appeared not horses but tigers; their manes were not manes, their neighing was not neighing; fourteen tigers, fourteen pairs of burning eyes, stood measuring the envoys. Acıbay's tongue cleaved to his palate; Tümönbay's heart leapt into his mouth.

— This is a peri's palace, whispered Acıbay. No army that enters here comes out again.

Kançoro stood in the courtyard that day, beside the tulpars; he saw the envoys' terror, and he laughed; but at the bottom of his laughter there was something else. Since Ürgönç, since the day he had refused the vanguard, he had watched the lord's eye slide away from him, had seen Külçoro seated at the right hand at table and himself at the left — seen it, and swallowed it. And with each swallowing, that thing, like everything nourished in darkness, grew silently.

Within, behind the curtain, they met with Semetey, who had kept himself hidden; the young lord had wiped the joy of the wedding from his face and spread the reckoning of war before him. They exchanged greetings; Acıbay recounted one by one his seven days' oath, Toltoy's fury, Çınkoco's talk of "my widow." Semetey's jaw tightened; at the word widow

his fingers found the hilt of Zulpukor, and let it go. The count of days was fixed: on the seventh day, either the girl would go, or blood.

With the appointed days running out, Külçoro knelt once more before Semetey.

— My lord, he said, at Ürgönç I was at fault; I was beguiled by a swing. Give me leave to pay my penance on the road. Let me watch Toltoy's road; let me find the army's mouth and the track of its vanguard. I beg you, send me.

Semetey looked long into the boy's eyes; within those twelve years he saw a hundred years of faith. He rose and equipped him with his own hands: first he drew over his back the Badana armor that Kanıkey had sewn stitch by stitch, prayer by prayer; over it the Akolpok, Manas's legacy; he hung Akkelte on his shoulder, fastened at his waist the battle-axe forged by the masters of Bölökbay, and put Sırnayza into his hand. Taybuurul was led up; the tulpar born of the wind-peri knew the one who mounted him, and pawed the earth. Ayçürök had offerings slaughtered; a grey mare was laid down, its blood given to the soil, its prayer to the sky. The peri's daughter opened both her hands and implored through her tears:

— May the forty çilten be his companions, may Kıdır walk before him, may the spirit of Almambet follow behind! May the zümrüdüanka spread its wing! This boy is a brother to me, this boy is an ember of the hearth; let him go safe and return safe!

Semetey took the boy by both shoulders and kissed his brow.

— You had no father; I have been to you both lord and elder brother, he said. Now go; but do not forget this: valor is not dying, it is returning. Keep your eye on the road and your ear to the ground; find Toltoy's vanguard, count their number, and do not show yourself. If the day of battle comes, on that day we fight together.

Külçoro sprang to his horse; a murmur burst from the company; Taybuurul shot forth like an arrow and, in the red of the evening, became a line of dust flowing to the horizon.

The boy rode through the night, rode through the day; he crossed desolate sands and dry ravines; and he came to Börü-Koy, the crossing of nine roads. There, where the roads were knotted together, stood the marker-stone of Manas: a black stone left from his father's campaigns, inscribed with an oath, unbeaten by rain or wind. Külçoro dismounted and touched his brow to the stone; then he raised Sırnayza and drove it into the earth with all his strength; the spear stood a span deep in the soil and a man's height upright against the sky. The forty çilten made a ring around him, the spirit of Almambet came to stand at his

head, the zümrüdüanka wheeled wide in the heavens. And the twelve-year-old child, in the middle of the enemy's road, at the crossing of nine roads, lay down without fear and slept; and his sleep was the sleep of clean consciences, deep and bottomless.

✦ ✦ ✦

In those same hours a scream broke out in the Cediger camp; Toltoy had woken drenched in sweat, clutching at his own flank. Çınkoco was summoned to his tent; Toltoy's face was like a dead man's.

— I saw a dream, he said, his voice shaking. A boy on a grizzled horse; iron from head to foot, white armor on his breast, a glazed spear in his hand. A child whose lip has not yet known the down of a mustache; but his eyes... his eyes were that old terror we knew as Manas. He drove his spear into my flank; my blood ran out like sand, my soul went out like a bird. I woke, and my flank aches still. Çınkoco, my elder, hear me: let us not take Ayçürök. There is a son left of Manas; his hearth has not gone out, his ember is not yet under ash. Were the dream a lie, my flank would not ache.

Çınkoco roared; the word of a coward found no lodging in his tent.

— Is an army broken by a dream? Shall we read dreams like women and flee the field of men?

Toltoy shook his head; slowly, stubbornly, he shook it.

— You do not know the hearth of Manas; I know it, he said. Let me tell you an old story, that you may see what the fire of that hearth is. Hear the tale of Kökötöy's funeral feast.

And Toltoy, in the middle of the night, wrapped his dread in a story and began to tell it; within the epic, another epic opened.

In Taşken, he said, there was a khan named Kökötöy; his goods would not fit in forty granaries, his herds filled forty valleys — a rich man without like or equal. He had no son of his own body; he had taken to his breast a boy found on the steppe, given him a name, raised him: Bokmurun. When Kökötöy died, this spoiled son undertook to give his father a mourning feast such as had never been seen, a memorial feast whose fame should spread through the seven climes, where the comer should be honored and the absent should repent.

The sage Koşoy, that mountain of an old man, took the boy before him and gave counsel: the place of your feast is fair, your intent is noble, he said; but Kıtay is near, and Koñurbay is a hungry wolf; without asking Manas, without Manas, this feast cannot be given; where there is no eagle, the raven descends upon the pasture. Bokmurun did not listen; he was young, his goods were many, his wit was short. He raised his whole people, his camps and his herds, from Taşkent and settled them at Üç-Karkıra, on that boundless pasture.

Then he called young Aydar; he set him upon Maaniker, that distance-devouring steed, and sent him to the four quarters. The invitation Aydar carried was no invitation but a menace: let the comer come, and as for him who comes not, this shall befall his head and that shall befall his goods — threat upon threat. It made no distinction of infidel or Muslim; all the khans were summoned. Kökçö came with his forty thousand riders; Muzburçak came, Ürbü came; Er Töştük came, who knew the world beneath the earth. They came and they came; the grass of Karkıra was covered with the lines of horses and the ropes of tents.

And one day the horizon darkened; not dust, but an army; not cloud, but Kalmuk. Coloy came; that earth-crushing champion, that brute strength, came down upon Karkıra with the tribes of Şibe behind him, a multitude whose end no eye could see. He came, and before he had even dismounted, he surveyed the feasting ground with a plunderer's eye. Bokmurun in his terror scattered gold; ingot upon ingot, herd upon herd he gave, and soothed Coloy. But a black stone settled that day upon the hearts of the handful of Muslims: if a single spark were struck in the midst of that multitude, the feast would turn to pillage, the festival would curdle into blood; and the one name that could hold that multitude in check was not yet at the feast.

Koşoy had walked through the midst of that multitude plucking at his white beard, sounding the khans one by one: Kökçö had turned his gaze away, Ürbü had shrugged his shoulders, Er Töştük had said, I know what lies beneath the earth, but I do not know what lies beneath this. All were thinking the same name, and none dared speak it; for Bokmurun, the giver of the feast, by not summoning that name, had left them all standing in the middle of the fire.

Toltoy fell silent; in the tent the embers crackled.

— That name was Manas, he said then, slowly. Until Manas came, no one at Karkıra drew an easy breath; when Manas came, even Coloy bowed his neck. Now think, Çınkoco:

the son of that name waits at Ayçürök's threshold; and in my dream I felt the spear that comes from that threshold in my flank. Do you still say we storm?

Çınkoco gave no answer; his rage and his fear grappled within him like two wolves. At last he rose to his feet, tore open the door of the tent, and looked out at the sea of fires.

— If I gather all these men and then scatter them over a dream, they will call me a dog in Cediger, he said. Let the seven days run out; if the girl comes, well and good; if she does not, though he be the son of Manas himself, though all forty of the çilten stand beside him, I will march upon him. Keep your dream to yourself, Toltoy; dreams do not bite on the field of men.

Toltoy said no more; but his hand, that night, never once left the flank that had been speared in his sleep. Outside the tent the night wore on; the thousands of fires of the camp went out one by one. And far away, at Börü-Koy, the crossing of nine roads, at the foot of Manas's marker-stone, a child slept with his Sırnayza driven into the earth; a child whose armor glimmered faintly in the grizzled light, the child seen in dreams who makes flanks ache. Six of the seven days were gone; tomorrow, the first hoofbeats would come to the crossroads.

CHAPTER 21

The Feast of Kökötöy and the Trials of the Field of Heroes

— ❖ —

The high pasture of Karkıra was boundless; there the hem of the sky touched the earth, and the breath of the earth mingled with the heavens. That summer such a multitude descended upon Karkıra that the rivers ran turbid, the grasses were trampled before they could reach the knee, and the smoke of countless fires tangled together into a single cloud. This was the great memorial feast given for the soul of Kökötöy Han; the cauldrons boiled day and night, no one could keep count of the slaughtered beasts, and the grey yurts spread across the steppe like a white herd. And beneath all this weight stood the shoulders of a thirteen-year-old boy: Bokmurun, son of Kökötöy, who had clenched his teeth, set his childhood aside, and greeted the guests, so that his father's name should not fall to the ground.

And the guests were not all of one kind. Enemies had come as surely as friends; there were more eyes seeking a share than mouths offering prayer. Orokkır, khan of the Şibe,

dismounted with his brows knotted; Bokmurun poured gold before him and led forth beasts for the slaughter, and only then did the khan's knotted brow unbend. After him came Konurbay, khan of the Keçil, who had brought not dust from where he came, but hatred; he laid the blood of his father Alööke at the door of the Kırgız, and sought the price of that blood at every table. Before him too Bokmurun heaped ingots of silver and strung fair words; Konurbay took the gold and did not surrender his hatred. Last of all came down Ezkara, khan of the Mançu, who long ago had betrayed Manas to Esenkan — a sorcerer and a diviner who could look into a man's face and read the fear within, who could glance at a horse's croup and measure its heart. His eye was on neither gold nor slaughter-beasts. His eye was on the horse standing at the head of all the tethering-lines, silken of mane, fiery of gaze, without peer or equal on the face of the earth: Maaniker, the legacy of Kökötöy.

— Give me this horse, said Ezkara; his voice was low, but a serpent's hiss lay within it. Give it, and your feast shall be a feast. Refuse, and I shall bring this pasture down upon your heads; I shall overturn your cauldrons, break your standard, and turn your feast to mourning. The word is mine; the time is yours.

Bokmurun's boyish face turned to ash. Maaniker was his father's living memory; to give up Maaniker was to bury Kökötöy a second time. But to refuse was to spill blood amid that multitude. The boy khan could say neither yes nor no; the allotted days began to run, and that day a black cloud settled over the feast that was not the smoke of any cauldron.

Would that the cloud had stayed only in the sky. The Kalmak and Kıtay throngs, at this feast whose master was young and whose watchmen were few, had already slipped their halters. They squatted down at the hearths, plunged their hands into unboiled cauldrons, snatched raw meat and tore it from one another's mouths. A cook who stood against them they beat, breaking the ladle over his head; they overturned the jars of ayran and fouled the felts. The Muslim khans exchanged glances, and no one stepped forward; for Ezkara, that sorcerer's eye, had gone from lodging to lodging, weighed the warriors one by one, and found them all wanting. He had looked at Koşoy and said: an old man of eighty-five, his bones grown heavy, his day gone by. He had looked at Töştük and said: a weary man but seven days returned from beneath the earth; even his shadow craves rest. He had looked at Kökçö and only laughed; and that laugh had wounded Kökçö deeper than any sword. And Manas? Manas was not there. Talas was far, and no word had been sent; and without him this pasture was no different from a flock whose shepherd is lost in the mountains.

That night, while helplessness wandered among the grey yurts like the sound of footsteps, white-bearded Koşoy came to Bokmurun's pavilion. He sank down by the fire, gazed long into the flames, then lifted his head:

— He who gives the feast bears the fault, my child, he said. Once you have opened your door, the weight of every breath that enters is yours. But even fault has its remedy. The wind that will scatter this black cloud blows from Talas. Send word to Manas. Choose a man swift of foot and steady of heart; and set Maaniker beneath him. Let him who covets Maaniker behold Maaniker's dust.

That very night young Aydar leapt onto Maaniker's back without waiting for the dawn. Bokmurun held his stirrup:

— Let him not be later than six days, he said; his voice trembled. When six days are done, Ezkara will keep his word. Fly, Aydar; be a bird, be the wind, be what you will — only do not be late.

Maaniker slid into the night like a black star. Such a horse was he that he knew not the stone he trod nor the water he crossed; he counted the climb a descent, the descent a plain, and folded night into day. Aydar neither slept nor rested in the saddle; if wolves howled he did not hear, if the blizzard struck he did not see; his mind held nothing but the reckoning of six days. A road of three days and three nights Maaniker folded and gathered up; in the grey of morning he stood before the orda of Manas in Talas, sheathed in foam. In that moment the horse seemed to drop to its knees; even the great tulpar drew one deep breath after such a run.

Manas had that hour returned from the hunt; as he listened to the news that Aydar poured out gasping, his face darkened, and the darker it grew, the greater it became. Kökötöy dead, his fortieth-day rites given, his year-feast passed, his great memorial raised — and no one had sent Manas so much as a pair of words. Could friendship suffer a heavier insult? The khan's wrath swelled, and Zulpukor came half out of its sheath:

— So they counted me among the dead! Manas, who was not summoned to the feast, was not needed for the news either, it seems! Tell me, Aydar — if I strike you down here and now, who will count me the less for it?

Aydar dropped to his knees and stretched out his neck; his young heart trembled not with fear but at the thought of his road spent in vain. Then Bakay stepped between them, his white beard on his breast, his voice deep:

— Do not raise your sword against a boy, Manas. The fault is not in the messenger, but in him who delayed the message. And consider: if Ezkara takes Maaniker, tomorrow he will reach for Akkula. If Kökötöy's feast is brought down, it is not Kökötöy who falls — it is the face of the Kırgız.

Kanıkey came too; stately, unhurried, her eye seeing far. She neither pleaded nor implored; she only opened the door:

— It seems the day has come for the kaftans I have been stitching these six years, she said. I have cut forty kaftans for the forty companions; they let no arrow through, they turn the sword aside, they make the lance slip. Forty war horses stand fed and waiting. Save your wrath not for us, my khan, but for the black cloud over Karkıra.

Manas's wrath, like a flood that finds its channel, grew calm and grew strong. By Kanıkey's hand he put on Akolpok, the kaftan that no arrow pierced and no fire touched; he rose onto the back of Akkula, whose breath was the equal of the storm. Bakay rode ahead, Almambet took his right hand, Çubak his left, Sırgak guarded his back; the forty companions girded themselves in the forty kaftans, and forty horses stamped like forty thunderbolts. Three days and three nights they rode; scattering the snows of the Kızıl-Kıya pass like a grey cloud, they came down upon Karkıra.

They came down, and Karkıra saw them from afar: first a dust rose on the horizon, then out of the dust appeared the white standard, then beneath the standard the chest of Akkula. A child cried out, an old man rose to his feet; the name passed from mouth to mouth like the wind: Manas is coming — Manas! In an instant the pasture was transformed. The Muslims whose hope had run dry revived as if waking from the sleep of the dead; some wept, some cried God's greatness, some could only say "He has come," and found no other word. The plunderers who had been ransacking the hearths, the moment they saw Akkula's dust, left the meat in the cauldron and the ladle in the ashes and scattered. Koşoy clasped Manas to his breast; but the old man's mind was still on prudence:

— Ezkara's eye is on Maaniker, he said. Give the horse and be free of it; so much blood is not worth one horse.

Manas shook his head; his voice was low, and heavy as stone:

— Koşoy aba, you are my elder in years, yet you know this better than I: he who gives Maaniker today gives Akkula tomorrow. He who gives Akkula tomorrow gives Kanıkey the

day after, then Talas, then the standard. A people that gives and gives away keeps its name and loses itself. Maaniker stays where he stands.

Then he took up his whip and rode upon the hearths. The whip cracked across the backs of those who had overturned the cauldrons; the meat fell from the hands of those who had snatched it raw; he drove Kalmak into Kalmak and herded them, and penned the Kıtay into their tents. Ezkara made to stand in his path; Manas's whip turned once in the air, and the sorcerer-khan's cap flew from his crown and fell in the dust ten paces off. Ezkara stood staring at his cap; with the cap, his majesty too lay on the ground. Konurbay dismounted, and the Kıtay lords dismounted one after another; they knelt and bowed their heads:

— Our fault is greater than our necks, they said. Forgive us for the feast's honor; we trampled the right of the guest, we forgot the right of salt.

Manas forgave; for over a great memorial feast blood must not fall — and if it falls, it is written not against the giver of the feast but against him who spoils it. Peace was made, the cauldrons boiled anew, the black cloud scattered — scattered, yet did not wholly depart; at the pasture's edge, above Konurbay's tent, it lingered like a thin shadow. And Bokmurun at last proclaimed his father's feast as a feast should be proclaimed: the wrestling prize — a thousand dark camels, a thousand mares, a sack of gold! As the criers shouted, a rumble broke from the Kıtay side; Coloy, vast as a mountain, had risen from his place and was tightening his belt. When he rises, they said, the earth itself bows; he rose and looked toward the Muslim side: who would come out against him? The khans looked at the ground before them, the warriors at their knees. And Manas's eye turned slowly, like a wheel, and came to rest on Koşoy, eighty-five years old.

✦ ✦ ✦

— My day is past, Manas, said Koşoy; there was no reproach in his voice, only weariness. My bones are heavy, my knees are dry. Coloy is a mountain; I am now only the mountain's shadow.

— The shadow is longer than the mountain, aba, said Manas. And the ground you do not hold is ground we cannot hold. You are the face of the Kırgız; a face must not fall to the earth.

Then Manas brought out the gift he had kept hidden: a kandagay, wrestling breeches that Kanıkey had stitched in ninety days from the hide of the wild goat of Too-Kuygak; ninety days she had soaked it, ninety days she had beaten it, and into its seams she had sewn a secret. Manas offered it to Koşoy with both hands, and the khan before whom worlds trembled lowered his voice to a beggar's humility:

— Take this, aba, put it on; go out against Coloy. In return I ask no gold, I ask no horse. One thing only do I beg: a prayer. A prayer for a child. The world has bowed before me, I have taken three wives, and no son's voice sounds at my hearth. You, who by the honor of your white beard may knock at the gate of heaven — knock at it for me.

Koşoy took the kandagay and put it on — and could not. The hide would not come over the old man's broad hips; the clasp found no purchase, and the breeches hung useless at his legs. Laughter rose from Coloy's side. Manas's eyes went dark; shame is the maddest of all rages. He turned on Kanıkey, his hand going to his sword:

— Was ninety days spent for this? Did you stitch this to make the Kırgız a laughingstock?

Kanıkey did not so much as blink before the sword. She stepped forward, turned the kandagay's inner face outward, undid the clasp hidden within the seam — that secret knot — and the hide opened as if it were alive and settled upon Koşoy's waist; neither tight nor loose, as though the wild goat had been born for those breeches. Koşoy looked once at the breeches, once at Kanıkey; the old eyes kindled:

— With such wit, with such patience... This is a woman fit to bear a lion, he said. Then he opened his hands to the sky; the pasture fell silent, the cauldrons fell silent, even the wind seemed to hold its breath. — May your wish be granted, Manas! May God give fire to your hearth and a son to your arms! I have named the son who is to be born: may Allah befriend Semetey! May this Semetey be a hero, a black-eared lion; may he raise his father's standard from the ground and break the sleep of his father's foes!

— Amin, said the pasture with one mouth; tens of thousands of hands were drawn down over faces. Kanıkey wiped her eye with the corner of her headscarf; no one saw, only Bakay saw, and he pretended not to.

Then the field of champions was made ready, and two mountains took hold of one another. Coloy came on, every step a drum, every breath a bellows; Koşoy stood fast, a great plane tree deep of root. They grappled — a day passed, and they did not part. Two

days passed, three days passed; Coloy bore down, Koşoy would not be uprooted; Koşoy turned him, Coloy would not be thrown. Sweat rose from where they gripped, dust from where they trod; around the two of them the field was beaten flat as a threshing floor. The crowd slept and woke, the cauldrons boiled and were emptied; the wrestling went on. On the fourth day Coloy heaved, and Koşoy's knees came near the earth; the hearts of the Muslim side leapt to their mouths, and Kanıkey prayed behind the curtain. On the fifth day Koşoy wrenched him about, and Coloy staggered and recovered; the Kıtay side turned to stone. The wrestling went on. On the sixth day, as the sun leaned toward late afternoon, the old wolf remembered a trick of his youth: when Coloy bore down upon his chest with all his weight, Koşoy suddenly gave way, slipped aside, and hooked the treacherous inner trip. The mountain turned upon its own weight, and the earth of Karkıra kissed Coloy's back. At the roar that broke loose, birds took wing; the Muslim side carried Koşoy on their hands, and the thousand dark camels, the thousand mares, the sack of gold were heaped before the old man; Koşoy shared it all out among those present, keeping for himself a single prayer.

Then to the single combat of wrestlers came Tükübay, champion of the Kıtay; and when it was asked who would face him, Kanıkey sent word from behind the curtain: "Let Er Agış go out; I stand surety for him." A man for whom a woman stands surety, they say, does not bring shame; Agış walked onto the field, closed with Tükübay, was shaken once, gathered himself twice, and at the third exchange seized the Kıtay champion by the sash, lifted him to the sky, and dashed him against the black rock. Whether the rock cracked or the champion cracked, no onlooker could tell; Tükübay was broken in two, and the field was settled.

That evening Akun, khan of the Oogan, came to the pavilion; on his face was the light not of a man who has seen game, but of a man who has seen a wonder.

— Manas, he said, hunting I found a child; as if fallen from a swan's wing — a peri's daughter, they say, and her name is Ayçürök. I am raising her as my own daughter. Koşoy's prayer will not go to waste; a son will be born to you. Come, let us make a cradle-betrothal; let my Ayçürök be written to the lion that shall be born to you. If you die, let your word remain; if I die, let my oath remain.

Manas looked at Bakay; Bakay bowed his head: "A word weighs more than wealth." Seven hundred horses were led across, and the bond of kinship-by-cradle was tied; the two khans embraced. No one at Karkıra knew it that day, but the epic's road of tomorrow —

Semetey's road, Ayçürök's road, and the blood that would be spilled upon that road — was drawn that evening over a bowl of kımız.

Then came the great race. Horses were entered for the prize, and entered, and entered again: seven thousand and forty-three horses! At their head Manas's Akkula, Coloy's Açbuudan, Töştük's Çalkuyruk that had seen the underworld; and one more, a black horse entered secretly, asking no one's leave: Konurbay's Algara. Bakay rode the course himself; he set the far turning-post all the way at Celpiniş, to the measure of Akkula's wind: "On a short road every horse can fly; on a long road it is the heart that runs," he said. The horses were counted, their ears were marked, their riders chosen from among boys; then the crier called, and seven thousand and forty-three horses broke away like a single body, became dust, and poured toward the horizon. When the dust settled, an emptiness remained on the pasture that no heart could bear; and could the pasture stand idle until the return? — the contest of champions was proclaimed: single combat with the lance.

And from the Kıtay side there rode onto the field a shadow in black armor, not leading Algara but astride him: Konurbay. He was seeking his father Alööke's blood on that field.

— Let no one but Manas trouble himself, he shouted. My debt is written on his neck.

Manas, having sent Akkula into the race, was counted a man afoot; he turned and looked at Almambet:

— Give me your Sarala, my brother.

Almambet gave Sarala, but his eyes darkened: "I know Konurbay; his tricks are many. Beware — do not leave your chest uncovered." With Akolpok on his back, Kanıkey's dressing, and Sarala beneath him, Manas rode onto the field. The two tulpars flowed at one another; lances boomed on shields and broke; new ones were given, and broke in turn. Sixty lances were shattered that day; at the sixtieth Manas caught the wavering of Konurbay's shield, set his lance against his chest, and drove — and the khan of the Keçil was torn from Algara's back and sat down in the dust. The pasture groaned. The law is known: the fallen man's horse is the victor's spoil. They led Algara before Manas; Manas stroked the horse's mane once, then held the rein out to Konurbay:

— Take your horse. I did not shed your father's blood; you too, bury your hatred in the dust. A true man should not rise horseless from the place where he fell.

Konurbay took the rein and bowed his head; but as he bowed it, no one saw his eyes. Almambet saw. He came to Manas's side, and his voice was bitter:

— You gave back the horse, and you think you have pardoned the hatred. Manas, I was born in that land, I drank that water; I know. Until this Konurbay is dead, the Kırgız will know no healing. What you pardon today will come upon your head tomorrow.

Manas made no answer; forgiveness ran deeper in his nature than the sword. But Almambet's words remained at his ear like a low hum that would last for years.

Then came the turn of the cambı shoot: at the top of a pole raised to the sky, a silver ingot hung upon a cord; whoever brought it down should have it. Thousands of marksmen came and went; arrows strayed, bullets faltered, and the silver swung on. Then the forty companions took their places in line; each cut one cord — cord by cord it thinned, until the silver hung by a hair's breadth, and the last cord was severed by Manas's shot. The ingot fell into the dust, applause rose to the sky; on the Kıtay side, brows knotted. Bakay read those brows and drew Almambet aside:

— The race has yet to return. The Kıtay will lay their tricks; at the turning they will startle horses, scatter fodder, loose arrows. You know their tongue and their dress. Go, hold the road.

Almambet wrapped himself in the Kıtay kaftan handed down from his forefather Çılaba, braided his hair, changed his cap; his own mother would not have known him in that guise. He rode to the narrowest defile of the homeward road, kept pace beside the leading horses, and roared challenge upon challenge in four tongues — Kıtay, Kalmak, Soloon, Şibe: "Clear the road! May the hand that touches the great race wither!" Those lying in ambush took him for one of their own and faltered; the scatterers of fodder were left with the fodder in their hands. And out of the first cloud of dust to break from the defile appeared a body drawn like a bent bow: Akkula! Açbuudan behind him, Çalkuyruk behind Açbuudan; Akkula entered Karkıra alone, and hearing his master's cry, gave one last shudder and breasted the line. Bokmurun had the prize counted out; the wealth was heaped at the mountain's foot like a hill.

But upon that hill two pairs of eyes were fixed, as the wolf's eyes fix upon the sheep: Konurbay and Coloy, on their horses, silent, calculating — waiting.

✦ ✦ ✦

Before the prize was fully counted, the Kıtay-Kalmak horde broke loose from one flank. It was Konurbay's signal, Coloy's war-cry, the droves of Boroonçu and Ilama; the herdsmen were crushed beneath whips, the camels driven off, the mares scattered, the sack of gold slung onto a horse. The tongues of the Muslim khans cleaved to their palates; one of them stroked his white beard and whispered: "If seven wolves fall upon one colt, will they leave its carcass? Let us bow our necks; goods may go, so long as life remains."

That word reached Manas's ear, and the khan roared with a voice no one had heard until that day:

— He who calls my horse feeble — I will slaughter his horse and eat it! Wealth is the shadow of honor; he who lets his shadow be seized lets himself be seized. Whoever is a man, let him fall in behind me!

And he rode alone. Akkula fell upon the midst of the pillage like a thunderbolt; Manas's whip boomed first on Konurbay's shield, then swung and split Coloy's chin; the mountain of a strongman spat his own blood into his palm. Then the pasture filled with the sound of an arm whetted for forty years: Almambet crushed the right wing, Çubak the left; Bakay split the center, Sırgak cut off the fugitives' road; the forty companions drove in from forty sides. Kalmak was tumbled into Kıtay; Kıtay drowned in its own dust. Almambet saw Coloy fleeing, already across the river; he strung his bow, sent one arrow over the water, and the arrow sank into Açbuudan's breast. The great horse toppled at the water's edge; Coloy was left on foot — and for a mountain to be left on foot is worse than its falling. The Kalmak of ten thousand hearths were broken that day; the driven-off herds were taken back a thousandfold, and the herdsmen's vengeance was paid with interest. Kökötöy's feast, which had begun in blood and would have ended in blood, was returned to law and custom by Manas's whip; and when Bokmurun opened his palms in prayer for his father's soul, the shoulders of thirteen years had become the shoulders of a khan.

Thus it had been. Thus was Kökötöy's feast given, and thus did Karkıra behold it.

But the place where these words were spoken was not Karkıra; many waters had flowed over those days, Manas had gone into the black earth, and in Talas his son Semetey had raised the standard. The tale was being told in the guest-house of the Cediger land, on a winter's night; the fire had sunk to embers, the listeners' kımız had gone cold at their feet, and not one had stirred from his place. The old man laid his kopuz across his knee and fixed

his eyes on the man sitting in the seat of honor, whose eyes glittered with greed — Çınkoco, son of Şıgay: — I have told you this tale as a warning, bek. You have seen at Karkıra what becomes of the hand stretched out toward another's goods, toward a fate written for another. The horses of those who plundered Kökötöy's feast died, and their faces fell. And now you have set your eye on Akun Han's daughter, on Ayçürök, written to Semetey from the cradle. Turn back. Manas is dead, but his standard is not on the ground; in Talas sits Semetey, beside him Külçoro and Kançoro, behind him Bakay.

Çınkoco drained his bowl of kımız at one draught and hurled the bowl into the fire:

— Manas's age is past, singer. Keep your prayers for another; the girl is mine. I will take Ayçürök; if need be I will bring Oogan down about her ears.

The word turned and wandered and came before Toltoy, khan of the Cediger; Çınkoco was asking him for an army, a shoulder, a partnership. At first Toltoy sat heavy:

— Do not touch Semetey, he said. Do not touch Bakay. Has any man ever taken fire from that hearth and not been burned? You too heard the tale of Karkıra.

But Çınkoco's tongue was a serpent's tongue: coward, he said; the khan of the Cediger has a woman's heart, he said; he said it at the table, he had it said on the hunt. A stone knows the place it will pierce; the stone of cowardice struck Toltoy full on the brow. The khan set the rakı to his lips and drank; and as he drank, the discernment within him guttered out, and a black fire settled in its place. He girded on his twelvefold arrow-proof kaftan and had his tulpar Surkoen led out. As he set foot in the stirrup he paused a moment; from the bottom of his heart a voice passed like a cold hand: "If I go today, I die." He went nonetheless; to turn back from a man's word weighed heavier on him than death. He turned Surkoen's head toward the Oogan road and rode into the dark.

But in Oogan, behind the white curtain of the palace, Ayçürök was not sleeping. She was a peri's daughter; she could put on the swan's plumage, and she heard what the wind brought before the wind itself. That night an oppression had fallen on her heart, and she had looked from her window at the stars: one star had darkened, and the black wind blew contrary. Evil was on the road; the girl knew it without knowing its name. She opened her hands and prayed, sent her prayer up to the sky, and brought down between Talas and Oogan an enchanted mist that swallowed mountains and erased the road. In that mist Toltoy lost his way; Surkoen pricked up his ears and stood, and would not go forward. And when the mist parted for a moment, Toltoy saw before him a child: at the foot of a rock, a stone for his pillow, a sleeping boy of twelve. And the horse grazing at his side — Toltoy's

blood drained away: it was Taybuurul, Semetey's tulpar. And the one sleeping on the stone pillow was Külçoro, son of Almambet.

The boy woke at the horse's neigh; his waking and his rising were one, his rising and his reaching for his weapon were one. He lifted Akkelte, the great gun left from Manas, and emptied it at the sky; the mountains boomed, the mist shuddered. And from the boy's throat broke a war-cry no boy should own:

— Manas! Manas!

That name, within that mist, became an army. To Toltoy's spellbound eyes there appeared columns issuing from the valley's mouth: Manas at their head, beneath the white standard; Bakay at his right, Almambet at his left, Çubak behind — the dead had risen, and all the majesty of Karkıra was marching upon him. The hero's heart broke; he wrenched Surkoen's head around and fled. Külçoro leapt onto Taybuurul and gave chase; as he chased he laughed, and as he laughed he called:

— Do not run, bek, do not run! Were you not come as a bridegroom? Does a bridegroom flee — is this how a kinsman-by-marriage is met?

He overtook him and hurled the secret lance left from his father Almambet — that black iron steeped six days in dragon's venom; the lance struck and lodged in the base of Toltoy's spine. The khan doubled over with the pain — but death always tries one more road: he turned and raised his sword against the child — raised it, and his hand hung in the air; as though an unseen hand, the hand of God, had gripped his wrist, the sword would not fall. In that instant the rein, wet with mist, slid from Külçoro's palm; Taybuurul stumbled as if hobbled, a breath's width of distance opened — and in that one breath the wounded khan saved his life and vanished into the mist.

✦ ✦ ✦

Toltoy reached the Cediger land half dead; the wound at the base of his spine had blackened with the dragon's venom, and its ache had worked into the marrow. The healers of Cediger swarmed about his head; they drew the black blood with cupping, pressed the salve called üpü upon the wound, tended him forty days; the khan came back from death's threshold. He came back, but his first word was not thanksgiving; it was a curse. Çınkoco came to his bedside, and the two beks fell upon each other:

— It was your doing, said Toltoy; may the tongue that called me coward wither. You made me drunk and sent me onto the road; what met me was a child, a child — and I, khan of the Cediger, was struck at the base of my spine!

— Had you been a man, said Çınkoco, you would not have fled from a child. Ask your wound not of the child, but of your own heart.

They cursed and reviled each other; but hatred, once it becomes a partnership, is stronger than enmity. The hatred of them both flowed toward Talas, toward Semetey, toward Ayçürök. Toltoy, risen from his bed, gathered his army this time without rakı, sober and cold with wrath: Tölök took the van, Tölöbay took the banner, Kalça held the right arm and Kadırbay the left; and when the hosts of Cediger and Çınkoco joined, the ground was crushed where they marched and the waters ran muddy. The army set out against Oogan, for Ayçürök.

In those hours dawn was breaking over Talas. Külçoro, with the shame of the mist and the slipped rein upon him, had ridden all night and reached the orda; Semetey met him in the mottled light of dawn and clasped him to his breast the moment he dismounted:

— Do not be ashamed, my brother, he said. He who put Toltoy to flight at twelve — whom will he not put to flight at twenty? If the rein slipped, it is the rein that slipped; your hand held true. Were your father Almambet alive today, he would kiss you on the brow.

Külçoro's eyes filled, filled but did not spill; he was Almambet's son, and poured his tears inward. He only lifted his head and looked toward the dawn: — If he crosses my path again, he said, I will hold the rein with my teeth. At that very moment a dust appeared on the horizon; it was Acıbay coming, his horse's mouth sheathed in foam:

— Semetey! Cediger has risen; Toltoy and Çınkoco, with Tölök, Tölöbay, Kalça, and Kadırbay in the van, are marching on Oogan, crushing the earth as they come. They will take Ayçürök by force; Akun Han's gate is black with smoke!

Semetey closed his eyes for a moment. Whether he thought of Karkıra, or of the prayer of Koşoy who had named him before he was born, or of that old cradle-bond tied with seven hundred horses, or of the father he had never seen — no one knew. He had not yet seen Ayçürök; but a man carries in his heart what was written to him from the cradle, even unseen. Then he went down to the river in silence and made his ablutions; on the felt he prayed two rekats, and drew his palms down over his face. He rose; he put on Akolpok, which Kanıkey's hands had once fitted to his father and which had come down from father

to son — and the kaftan settled on his shoulders as though it knew its master. He thrust Zulpukor into his sash; the sword moaned once in its sheath. Taybuurul was led out, the forty warriors mounted; and Semetey, his face toward Oogan, his heart toward Ayçürök, said only this as he set foot in the stirrup:

— Karkıra saw the end of those who plundered my father's table. Let the world now see the end of the hand stretched out toward Ayçürök.

The horses stamped, the dust rose; over Talas, just as once over Karkıra, a morning was rising that smelled of war.

CHAPTER 22

The War for Ayçürök and the Road to Beecin

— ❖ —

The news fell upon Talas before the wind. At the mouth of the Keñ-Kol the horse herds neighed, the dogs set to howling, and the felt doors of the grey yurts opened one after another; for in the distance had appeared the dark shape of a rider coming in a burst of dust. The one who came was Acıbay, honey of tongue and arrow of word; the old master of speech who had served as orator in Manas's orda, whose every utterance had reached the ears of the forty clans. His horse's mouth was sheathed in foam, his own beard soaked in sweat; without dismounting from the saddle he shouted:

— Where is Semetey? Where is the seed of Manas, the nursling of Kanıkey? If he sleeps, wake him; if he hunts, call him; I bring word, and my word is heavy!

When Semetey came out before the orda, Acıbay struck his knee to the ground and poured out, gasping, what he carried within: Çınkoco son of Şıgay and Toltoy khan of the Cediger, the two joined as one, had fallen into the madness of taking Ayçürök by force;

they had ringed round the Afghan land of Han Akun on every side, broken the lattice of the yurts, toppled the roof-rings, set brides and daughters weeping. The smoke of the Oogan land had risen as a pillar to the sky; Akun the khan, tearing at his white beard, had sent criers to the four quarters, calling: "Is there no son of Manas — is there no word of the cradle-betrothal?"

Acıbay caught his breath and poured out the rest of his word: one of the besiegers was a black-hearted sorcerer, schooled in the lands of Kakan, who played with the sky itself; the other was the monstrous khan of the Cediger, who trusted in his strength and trampled law and custom. Akun the khan's soldiers were few, his hope was less; within the fortress the water had run short, and the children wailed. As he said this, the old orator's voice cracked; for carrying words is easy, and carrying grief is hard.

Semetey's face first turned to stone; then beneath that stone an ember began to move. So a pack of dogs had fallen upon Ayçürök — she who had been named to him in the cradle, who had found him herself, flying the sky in a swan's plumage. The young lord spoke one word, and no more:

— He who breaks the lattice, I will break his ribs. Of him who topples the roof-ring I will not say I shall topple his hearth; I shall put his hearth out.

That night the orda did not sleep. Kanıkey drew Akolpok over her son's back with her own hands; that war-kaftan, into which forty maidens had sunk the needle for forty nights, admitted no arrow and gave no road to the sword. Semetey girded on his father's legacies one by one: he wound about his waist the grey sash said to have descended from heaven, hung at his left the blood-unsated Zulpukor, took upon his shoulder Akkelte that reached far and never missed; he weighed in his palm the secret lance that the lame master Bölökbay had mended and tempered with its glaze. As he took up each one, he spoke his father's name within; it was as though he girded on not iron, but a father's breath.

Taybuurul, saddled by Ayçürök herself, waited at the door — that horse whose ears stood keen as knives, whose croup was broad as a mountainside; when he struck the ground the earth groaned, and when he reared his shadow covered an encampment. Semetey set foot in the stirrup and mounted, drew the rein once; the horse shivered and neighed, as if it had sensed the ember in its master's heart.

These were the ones he took at his side: Külçoro, seed of Almambet — open of eye, sweet of tongue, heart of fire; Kançoro, son of Çubak — thick of shoulder, deep of gaze, his inner self open to no one; Baytaylak, son of Bakay; Kalık, warrior of Sarı Han; and

Camgırçı's Şayımbet. Six riders left Talas before sunrise; behind them went the prayers of two mothers, before them the wind of the steppe.

The road was long; grief made it seem short. They went with the lope of a hungry wolf; by day they took the cloud for companion, by night the star. When they reached the Oogan border they saw that the word was no lie: Akun the khan's land lay under smoke, and the ten-thousand-strong army of Cediger covered the face of the plain like ants; Toltoy's standard was pitched on one hill, Çınkoco's black tent on another, and between them Ayçürök's white orda huddled like a swan besieged.

Within the fortress, in the shadow of a tower, stood Ayçürök. For forty days her eye had been on the road, her ear on the wind; each morning of the siege opened with a hope, each evening closed with a fear. That morning, when six dark shapes appeared at the rim of the horizon, at first she did not believe; then she saw how the foremost horse struck the earth — she knew that stride, she had saddled that horse with her own hand. Taybuurul was coming. Ayçürök's knees gave way; she barely kept her feet, clinging to the stone of the tower, and only one word passed through her: he has come.

Semetey rode Taybuurul up onto a bare rock and halted. He looked down; he saw the ten thousand, and his brow did not move. He only loosed his voice upon the steppe, and it rolled across the plain like thunder:

— Cediger! I am Semetey, son of Manas! Whoever it is that drives an army against my betrothed's door and casts his eye upon my marriage bed, let him come forth; his blood is lawful to me, and his bones a gift to the wolves!

The army rippled a moment, and was silent; then Toltoy's drums began to beat, and red apocalypse broke loose.

On the left Külçoro plunged into Toltoy's ranks; before his sword the ranks lay down like grain before the sickle. From where he plunged in a scream went up; where he came out a gap remained; he was a boy of sixteen, but his sword seemed to remember the wrist of his father Almambet. On the right Kançoro split Tölök's host; where he drove his lance in he did not draw it back, and he toppled men with his horse's chest; he spoke little and broke many, and as he broke them his face never changed. Baytaylak fought as his father Bakay had taught him — unhurried, measured, every blow reckoned; Kalık and Şayımbet rained arrows from both flanks and cut off the road of the fleeing. Semetey struck the center, the thickest place. Where Taybuurul plunged, dead horses heaped up like a mountain; Zulpukor fell and rose, and where it fell a standard toppled, where it rose a head

flew. Three times they drove in, three times they came out; at the third the heart of Cediger broke; the plain lay in blood, and there was no end to the fleeing.

But victory is not a bird that settles on cheap meat. Çınkoco, who had learned sorcery in the lands of Kakan and knew forty wiles, came out of his black tent; in his hand was the yada stone, once Almambet's, that had changed hands long ago. He turned the stone in his palm, read over it, breathed upon it, and found the vein of the sky. Day was cut to night. Black smoke settled on the plain, eye could not see eye; hail came down like fists, horses shied, warriors lost their bearings. Semetey was left alone in the midst of that smoke; his arrows spent, his powder soaked, his voice no longer reaching his companions. As Çınkoco swung his staff within the smoke, the young lord's head spun, his helmet rang, the world droned in his ears. Even Taybuurul was bewildered; turn right, there was hail; turn left, smoke; the ground seemed to slide beneath his hooves. The sorcerer's laughter came through the smoke like a jackal's cry, circling now from the right, now from the left:

— Seed of Manas! Your father too was pressed this hard before Kakan; who do you think you are? Come, kneel; perhaps I shall spare your life for my dogs!

For a moment, one brief moment, Semetey said within himself, "Is it here I remain?" — then his father's name came to his mind, he clenched his teeth, gripped Zulpukor with both hands, and stood upright in the smoke.

Külçoro saw that smoke from without, and his heart leapt to his mouth. If he plunged in, the sword would avail nothing; iron does not bite on sorcery. He lay down behind a ditch and leveled Akkelte, but his hand trembled: what if, in the smoke, he struck wrong? What if Semetey— He shut his eyes and pleaded with the spirit of Manas:

— Arbak, spirit of the fathers! Show the way; let my bullet find the guiltless and fell the guilty. Manas, my forefather, do not let me slay your son!

The smoke parted for one breath; in the gap appeared Çınkoco's black cap. Akkelte spoke once. The evil Koco, his staff still in the air, dropped like a dead weight; the yada stone rolled from his palm, the sky cleared at once, the hail ceased, and the sun came out again as if ashamed. Külçoro sprang from his place like a hound, dropped upon the fallen man's chest, and drew his knife across his throat:

— Let your sorcery stay in your gullet; thus withers the hand that stole Almambet's stone!

Then they brought Tölök; he did not resist, his knees would not hold him. He was slaughtered as a sacrificial ram is slaughtered; his blood flowed into the earth as the vengeance of the lattices he had broken.

As for Toltoy — the great khan of the Cediger shrieked like a woman and fled. The one who gave chase was Külçoro, who since his ninth year had swallowed his mockery and his scornful words. As he pursued, his voice rang at the nape of Toltoy's neck:

— Stand, khan! Where away, great khan? You laughed at me when I was nine — "Almambet's orphan," you said; laugh now, and let me hear it! You said, "Can Kıtay spawn be a companion-at-arms?" — turn and say it to my face! The orphan's horse is at your back, khan; the orphan's sword is at your neck!

He overtook him; his slashing sword grazed the tail of the khan's horse, then cut the rein and brought him down. Just as he was about to draw the knife, Semetey arrived; Toltoy, coated in dust, looked up with pleading eyes. Semetey looked once at Toltoy, once at his companion; then he turned his rein:

— His blood is yours, Külçoro. Take with your own hand the price of every scornful word he has dealt you since your ninth year; I will not interfere.

Külçoro took it. Toltoy's standard toppled that day; his name was erased that day.

In the evening, the spoils were divided. Seven hundred head of each kind were counted, weapons were heaped, captives were set in rows. When Surkoen was brought forth, the blood-horse under which Toltoy had grown to manhood, Kançoro's eye caught upon that horse; he walked forward and laid his hand on the halter. But by law and custom the chief spoil belonged to him who had struck the chief blow and taken the blood-right; Surkoen was written to Külçoro's share. Kançoro said nothing. He drew his hand from the halter, stood back, and his face said nothing. But into the deepest deep of him, into that dark well no one ever saw, the first drop of estrangement fell that evening. "I split Tölök's army," said the voice within him; "why is my share always second?" The voice was low; no one heard it; even he did not fully hear it. The drop was small; the well was deep. And a drop that falls into a deep well silently awaits the day it will overflow.

Han Akun forgot his broken lattices and ordered a wedding feast. The old khan took his son-in-law's hand between his two palms and gave thanks in tears: "So the word of Manas does not fall to the ground; so the right of the cradle-betrothal is paid." Mullahs were brought, the marriage was sealed; Ayçürök — she who had flown the sky in a swan's

plumage and chosen her mate with her own eyes — was bound in holy wedlock to Semetey, son of Manas. When bride and groom sat side by side for the first time, neither spoke; the hunter who had shot at the swan and the swan who had chosen the hunter looked at one another in the place where words end. What can they call it but a feast that lasted forty days; the Afghan land blew away the terror of the siege with the smoke of the wedding. When the day of departure came, sixty red elephants were made to kneel and gold was loaded on their backs; seven hundred head of each kind of stock in front, the bride in the middle, the companions on either side — the caravan set out toward the sunset, toward Talas. All along the road the encampments poured out to see the caravan; children who had never in their lives seen an elephant laughed in fright, and the old asked one another, "Has the age of Manas come back?" Ayçürök rode on her white camel, her face veiled, her eyes open; from time to time she looked at the sky — that sky where once she had flown in a swan's plumage and chosen her mate from the heights.

As Ayçürök entered Talas she was led through the shade of the orchard Manas had planted; such was the custom — the shadow of the forefather was counted a blessing upon the bride. Kanıkey pressed her daughter-in-law to her breast, and the fire was renewed at Çıyırdı's hearth. That night in Talas the lights went out late; kımız was drawn, rams were slaughtered, the bards wept remembering Manas and laughed praising Semetey. No one saw the black cloud waiting behind the smoke of the wedding.

✦ ✦ ✦

The wheel turned, the season passed. In Talas the horses grew fat, the lambs bleated, the kımız foamed; the people were sound and the land at peace. When no enemy is left to fight, they say, a warrior's wrist begins to itch; what itched in Semetey was not his wrist but his bleeding wound. His sleep broke at night; by day, on the hunt, his gaze drifted to the distances. One evening, by the hearth, he struck his fist upon his knee and rose; his voice was low, but beneath it lay fire:

— While the Kıtay who cut my father's throat still stands, while Koñurbay, khan of the Keçil, sits preening in Beecin, I sit here drinking kımız and growing fat. If my father's blood stays unavenged upon the ground, how shall this head walk high, how shall these eyes look into any face? I swear it — until I reach Beecin, until I have set Koñurbay's blood steaming on the earth, let this waist not loosen its sash, let this mouth not taste meat!

The oath sank into the felt of the grey yurt; by the next day all Talas knew. The elders of the land gathered at the orda; the first word was given to the mother.

Kanıkey sat stately, her hands on her knees; on her face was neither opposition nor consent — only the knowledge of a woman who had once sent her husband down that road and received back from it a silence like a coffin. At the bottom of her voice was an ache that even the felt could hear:

— My son, I will not speak against your oath; a father's blood, were it a sea, could not be swallowed. But know this: the Beecin you speak of is a road of six months; in its middle lies a waterless desert of forty days, and there the sand grinds bone. Çoñ-Beecin has forty gates; at every gate sits a calamity, and in every calamity a thousand heads. Your father went with a thick army, and even he did not return easily. Do not carry only your heart; take Bakay, who has seen the road, at your head; gather the army in plenty, heap the provisions like a mountain. And set the campaign not in the summer heat but in the cool autumn; in autumn the horse is fat and the water sweet.

Then Bakay spoke. The old man whose white beard fell to his breast, whose word split stone, closed his eyes and was silent a while; through his silence passed the days when he had battered Kakan at Manas's side — those bloody, those glorious days when Almambet knew the road, when Çubak raced him, when Sırgak gave no man breath. He opened his eyes:

— Beecin is no easy morsel, my child. I fed wood under that cauldron; I know it; once it boils, it does not give back the meat it swallows. Even with a lion like your father among us, we did not come home cheap. You will wait one year. In one year chosen warriors will be gathered, eighty craftsmen will labor, provisions and külazık will be made ready; a man does not go naked into a forty-day desert. Show this patience, and this white beard will be your guide; it seems it was written that I should see the Beecin road once more before I die.

Sarı Han too rose from his place; lifting his cup, he poured out his word:

— Shall a son not die for honor? He dies, and his name remains. Go, my brave one; may your battle be victorious and your return be safe. May the white road lie before you and the spirits of the fathers behind you.

The words ended; the work began.

That year did not pass like a breath; it passed like a wrist being whetted on stone. In Talas iron was hammered, felt was pressed, leather was cut; the forges of eighty craftsmen

smoked day and night, and the ring of hammers became Talas's daily song. From the four quarters chosen warriors came and were tested; some shot the bow and were culled, some wrestled and remained, some were known by the sound of their horses' hooves. Kanıkey had the storehouses opened; kurut was dried, kazı was prepared, and the külazık that would endure the forty-day desert — that of which one handful gives a day's strength to a warrior — was pounded and kneaded in the hands of the women. Ayçürök did not sit idle either; she pressed her husband's campaign felt with her own hands, but she told no one that into every stitch she knotted a fear.

Semetey did not let the year go empty; every morning before first light he set Külçoro and Kançoro on horseback. Arrows were loosed, swords were swung, the night road was walked blindfold; for Bakay had said: in Beecin the day belongs to your enemy and the night to your friend — learn to ride the night like a horse. Külçoro led in every task; Kançoro fell behind in none; but the name of him who leads is spoken, and the name of him who merely does not fall behind is not — and the unspoken name grows in its own darkness.

As autumn drew near, the lame master Bölökbay opened the door of his forge. The works he had labored on for six years, shown to no one, tempered sixty times in the quenching, he laid out upon a felt; on each of them lay the soot of six years and the hardness of sixty waters.

— Look at this, he said: the golden-cheeked battle-axe; where it falls, a helmet turns to paper. This secret lance is worth eighty blood-horses; the water I gave its point, I alone know — I, and the fire. I have renewed the stock of Kelte and bound its crack; now it speaks with its old voice. These are twelve blades of tempered steel; and these bags are full of bullets I cast from lead. Six years I worked with a single prayer: that all of it be doomsday upon Koñurbay's head. Take them, my child. The lame master's feet cannot reach so far; let his work reach.

Semetey lifted the old man's blackened hands to his brow.

On the day of departure an early frost had fallen over Talas. Kanıkey brought out the armor she had finished in seven years, needle-stitch by needle-stitch; to the four companions she gave four saddlebags, and in each a çopkut fur, dry provisions, healing salves. Last of all she took Akolpok in both hands and drew it over her son's back; as she tied its laces, her fingers trembled. She clenched her teeth against weeping, and could not; her sob mingled with her prayer:

— If in the forty-day desert your water runs out, let your patience not run out. Before the forty gates, let your mind not stray. May your father's spirit walk at your right hand and Kıdır at your left. Go, my son… go, and return. Your mother asks only this of you: return.

Bakay took the lead; Külçoro and Kançoro joined at his two sides. Fourteen pack horses were tied in line; on the back of each was a year's labor and a campaign's hope. The whole people poured out to the mouth of Talas; Çıyırdı and Kanıkey, two mothers, stood side by side and wept together — one had once given her son to that road, the other her husband; the tears of both knew the same track in the same earth. Argın and Kırgız sent them off with one voice; the old recited prayers, the children ran after the horses, and those who could not run stood rooted where they were. The dust covered the departing and took them.

Last of all Ayçürök came out onto the road — asking no one, heeding no one. The lady who moved like a white doe did not move so that day; tearing her hair, she threw herself before the caravan, and her lament set the steppe aflame:

— Has anyone who meddled with Beecin ever come back alive, that you should? Behind the forty gates is death; in the middle of the forty-day desert is death! This heart has burned until it could almost say: go, and may you not return — see, my own ear hears what leaves my mouth, and is afraid! I chose you when I was a swan in the sky; shall I be a widow on the earth? Do not leave the camp orphaned and your wife in black, my lord!

Semetey held his rein short and did not turn his face. The campaign road was sacred; if lament mixes into the road, they said, the luck flies from it. The hero's face was set now toward the sunrise; all the rest was entrusted to the hearts of those left behind.

✦ ✦ ✦

At the next halting-place Ayçürök appeared again; she had cut across in the night and gotten ahead of them, wound herself into his horse's lead, and barred the road with her body. When the lament began anew, Bakay knotted his brows: to weep over a scouting road was ill-omened; a tear that follows behind is a prayer, one that goes before is a curse. Semetey leaned down and struck his wife's face one blow — not hard, but sharp; enough to cut the lament and open the road. Ayçürök's voice broke; her hand stayed frozen on her cheek. Semetey said only one thing, like stone:

— If you would not be a widow, stand out of my road; pray, and do not curse.

And they passed. Ayçürök stood in the dust, the print of a hand on her cheek, drying tears in her eyes, gazing after them.

Now the road was only road; behind it lament, before it the unknown. Four riders and fourteen pack horses drew out toward the sunrise like a thread; Bakay rode in front, scenting out the way, choosing each halting-place by the water, the grass, the set of the wind. Kötörmö was crossed; beyond the pass appeared Isık-Köl, deep blue, spread between sky and earth. Bakay's face opened; the old man slackened his rein and gazed his fill at the lake:

— Would not any servant of God prosper who made his home in such a place? Its partridge calls among the rocks, its deer walks in the coverts, its swan swims on the water. Its water freezes not in winter and floods not in summer; its shore is winter quarters, its uplands paradise. Ah, he said, ah — if the sons of men but knew its worth, this one lake would suffice, and more than suffice.

Praising it, they passed on. But Beecin's eye saw far; the black news outran the darkness. A watcher named Mıradıl, son of Kırım, had sensed the camp where they halted; he too knew the yada stone and could find the vein of the sky. At midnight the sky went suddenly black, the stars were wiped away; hail big as bowls began to fall, and a black storm set to tearing out the tents. The horses shied, the picket-stakes tore loose; who could see whom, who could hold what? Behind the curtain of the storm Mıradıl drove the fourteen pack horses before him, herded them off, and was gone. When morning came and the sky settled, they saw: the tethered mounts in their places, and of the fourteen loads not one. On the sand the hoofprints ran toward the sunrise, then entered stony ground and vanished; as if the earth had swallowed the horses and the sky had covered them.

Bakay came out of the tent, looked at the empty stakes, and tore at his white beard with both hands:

— Is he a companion-at-arms who does not watch the horses? Where were your eyes — what manner of sleep was that sleep! A year's labor, a campaign's provisions, gone in one night! — Then the old man's anger turned to grief; he remembered Manas, and his voice shook: — Would it have been so, had you been here, my lion? Not even the wind could enter your camp unannounced...

He wept for a time; then he shook himself, for he was a man of the road and knew the road's law:

— A lost horse may be found; wailing after what is gone mends no remedy and fills no store. Count what remains, balance the loads; he who stands staring after what has fallen drops what he still holds. March.

They marched. The passes of Tekes were crossed, the ridges of the Altay were left behind; the road came down to the blessed halting-grounds of Çon-Cıldız. There the old man's old grief stirred again: on these stones he had sat with Manas, in these waters he had cooled himself with Almambet as if at ablutions, on these grasses Çubak's horse had grazed. At the foot of that rock Sırgak had laughed; at the head of that spring Almambet had gazed into the water as if reading the future; all of them gone, and the stone remaining. Stone remains; and if beside the stone there remains one who remembers, that stone grows heavy. Bakay sank down at the foot of a rock; his tears became a thousand streams and ran down his beard:

— My lion, he said, where have you all gone? What sinner's head is mine, that I buried you all and remained myself — and now I lead your sons down the same road...

No one went near him; the warriors built the fire at a distance and left the old man alone with his grief. In the morning Bakay was the Bakay of every morning; only the rims of his eyes had sunk by one more night.

✦ ✦ ✦

The nearer they drew to Beecin, the heavier grew the air; as if the very earth had taken in Koñurbay's breath, and the grass had turned to thorns. Bakay slowed the road, and his eye began to sweep the four quarters; for he knew: Koñurbay's border was woven with enchanted sentinels, and those sentinels saw without being seen.

The first was Kuutülkü of the forty fathoms — his tail a besom of forty fathoms, a fox kneaded out of cunning itself, who carried what he saw to Beecin faster than the wind. Bakay sensed him behind a dune, lying with his nose to the wind; he made no sound, but loosed the collar of the hound beside him — that dog of Kumayık's line that lets no bird take wing — and breathed a word into its ear. The hound flowed out like a shadow. The fox wrote his cunning on the sand; the hound read the cunning in the air; beyond the third

dune it overtook him, seized him by the throat, strangled him, and dragged him back. Bakay looked at the carcass:

— One eye is closed. Two remain.

The second was the white kulca standing on the mountaintop — its horns spiraled, its coat snow; it looked to the four quarters and gave word to the four quarters, for the scent of man reached it from a day's ride away. To approach was impossible; the work must be done from afar. Bakay took Akkelte from Semetey's hand — he had seen that weapon on Manas's shoulder and heard its voice in forty battles. He set his knee to the ground, tasted the set of the wind, and took his aim not from the eye but from the heart. Akkelte spoke once more; the white shape on the mountaintop toppled, its horns flung against the sky.

— Two eyes are closed. One remains, said Bakay; in his voice was neither pride nor joy, only reckoning.

The third was the most cunning of all: Kuuördök, swimming in the middle of the reedy lake — a duck that dives at the sight of lead and flies at the sight of a shadow; no arrow avails against it, and no hound. Semetey looked at the bird on his wrist: Akşuñkar, the white gyrfalcon, its eyes two drops of night. He slipped its hood and cast it into the air. At first the falcon could not be seen; it climbed to the highest storey of the sky and melted into the sun. The duck, deceived by the absence of any shadow, stayed one breath upon the water's face — and that one breath sufficed. The sky split, a white lightning fell; Akşuñkar had seized Kuuördök in mid-air and was bringing it back amid the beating of wings.

— All three of Beecin's eyes are closed, said Bakay. Now it is we who see unseen. But the blind man's hand gropes for the wall; when Koñurbay loses his watchers, he will become all ears. From now on, keep the fires few and the voices low.

The next day the old man took Semetey with him and climbed the watch-hill. As they climbed they did not speak; stone slid, breath tightened, the path grew steep. On the hilltop the wind pulled from both sides like a rope. Bakay stretched out his hand; his finger traced in the air, one by one, the roads of a lifetime:

— Those you see are the roads of Varsa-Gelmez — Go-and-Return-Not; the name was not given in vain: many go, few come back. That white ridge is the saddle of Kaspañ-Too; who crosses it has entered the courtyard of Çin. And that — stretch your eye, my child — that lying in the smoky hollow is the fortress of the forty tribes of Çin, Çoñ-Beecin of the forty gates. Your father's blood is there, and your oath is there.

Semetey drew from his breast the great spyglass left from Almambet; those enchanted mirrors that brought the far distance into the palm of the hand. He turned it and looked, and his breath stopped: the face of Kır-Kayıñ was covered with a horse herd whose far edge could not be seen from its near. Koñurbay's horses — their number known to God alone — filled the plain, filled the valleys, filled the slopes; some grazed, some lay, some sparred. Semetey lowered the glass; in his eyes was the glitter not of the herd but of vengeance.

Bakay gave his last counsel there, on the hilltop, in the wind:

— Do not think that herd is unguarded. At its head sits Karagul; a tester of men, sharp-eyed, a boar whose sleep is a hare's sleep. And there is a grey horse with the ringed fetlock; if it catches one strange scent it gives the alarm to the four quarters, and its neighing carries to Beecin. Do not go by day — he who goes by day opens all forty of the forty gates upon himself. Go by night; take the boar's head, and do not startle the grey horse. Let the sun not touch the rim of dawn before your work is done.

Semetey set Kanıkey's blue-iron helmet upon his head; the iron his mother's hand had touched pressed cool against his brow. He tightened Buurul's girth with his own hand and set foot in the stirrup. He turned and looked at Bakay, at Külçoro, at Kançoro; he saw that the three looked at him in three different ways — the old man like a prayer, Külçoro like fire, Kançoro like a bottomless well. He set his voice down among them, low but like stone:

— If I do not come by the sixth month, cut off hope; tell my mother, that she may know her mourning and her rites. And if I come — I come with Koñurbay's herd before me and his head in my saddlebag.

Buurul reared and came down; the night swallowed the rider. Semetey rode down the slope with the moon at his back; Buurul's hoof fell on grass and not on stone — as if the horse too knew the secret of the work. First came the scent of the herd, then its murmur; the warm breath of thousands of horses swelled the night like a sea. The young lord, bearing his mother's prayer beneath his helmet and his father's oath beneath his sash, flowed like a shadow crawling over the snow toward Karagul's fire. Bakay stayed on the hilltop, the two companions on the slope; below, in the darkness of Kır-Kayıñ, the breath of the numberless herd rose like a single drone. Somewhere in the midst of that drone, his fire banked to embers, his eye in a hare's sleep, sat Karagul; and before the rim of dawn grew light, at that bed of embers only one of two fates would come true — either the boar's head would be taken, or the grey horse with the ringed fetlock would neigh doomsday to the forty gates of Beecin.

CHAPTER 23

The Raid on the Herds and Koñurbay in Ambush

— ❖ —

West of the lands of Beecin, on a plain so vast the eye could not compass it, Koñurbay's numberless herds grazed, mingled with the night wind. The breath of the mares rose in plumes of vapor; the foals dozed pressed against their mothers' flanks; far off, a stallion lifted its head again and again to listen to the darkness. In the middle of the herdsmen's camp the fire had burned down to embers, and the horse-keepers, burrowed under their felts, had settled into snoring. The youngest among them, Bozbala, a boy whose mustache had not yet dared to sprout, lay curled at the fire's edge and dreamed a dream — such a dream that even in his sleep the sweat poured from him.

In his dream a black cloud came down from the sky, and out of the cloud rode a warrior with naked sword; the horse he sat gouged the earth with its hooves and blew fire from its nostrils. I am the son of Manas, the warrior said, I am Semetey; he said it, and

drove the herds before him, mowed the herdsmen down as a reaper mows grain, put the camp to the torch, and tore Karagul's beard out by the fistful. Bozbala woke screaming, sat upright, and prodded the head herdsman sleeping on the far side of the fire.

— Karagul-aga, get up! I dreamed a dream, a black dream! The son of Manas is coming, he will cut us all down, he will drive off the herds, he will seize you by the beard and —

He never finished. Karagul had started from his sleep and already snatched up his whip. He brought it down on the boy's back, his shoulders, wherever it happened to land.

— Silence, ill-omened whelp! How many years is it since Manas died? His bones have rotted, his hearth is cold! A son of his, indeed? Speak that name again and I will tear out your tongue. A dream is nothing but the growling of an empty belly; lie down, sleep, and do not spook the mares.

Bozbala cowered and curled into his felt; but the shudder in his heart would not pass. Above the steppe the stars burned cold and colder, and it seemed to the boy that far away, toward Talas, the sound of hooves was moving beneath the earth. Nor were the herds at ease that night; the mares kept turning their heads into the wind, the stallions stopped again and again to paw the ground. A horse hears before a man does; it takes from the wind the scent of the coming day and the salt of the blood that will be spilled. Karagul saw none of it; he tucked his whip into his breast and went back to his snoring.

As the horizon paled toward dawn, Koñurbay returned from his rounds. The black champion came on like a mountain astride Algara; the tulpar's mane was braided, its tail knotted, its eyes like live coals. Koñurbay dismounted, called for kumis, and drained half a skin at a draught; then, well pleased with himself, he sat cross-legged among the herdsmen and began to boast.

— Do you know who I am, my slaves? I am the man who struck down that Manas, the lion of the Kirghiz, from behind in the gorge of Kara-Suu. No one had courage enough to look him in the face; I followed at his back, I lay in ambush, I buried my spear beneath his shoulder blade. Down he went, his hearth went dark, his horde was scattered. Who now on all the steppe is greater than Koñurbay?

The herdsmen bowed their heads to the ground and said yes; only Bozbala, remembering his dream, clenched his teeth. Koñurbay rose and thrust Algara's halter into Karagul's hand.

— Turn Algara loose among the herds; let him graze, let him rest. There is a feast in Beecin — the line of Esenkan is giving a toy; I shall be gone three days and three nights. Keep the watch tight, Karagul. Take your eye off the herds and I will gouge that eye out; fall asleep, and I will make your sleep eternal.

— As you command, khagan, said Karagul, bent double at the waist. No bird shall fly over them, no wolf come near.

Koñurbay mounted a spare horse and rode for Beecin, raising the dust behind him. And before that dust had even settled, Bozbala's dream came clothed in flesh and bone.

As the evening dark came down, a single rider appeared on the line of the horizon. At first he was only a shadow; then he grew, and grew, until he was a mountain that made its horse dance. Where Taybuurul's hoof touched, the earth burst upward; on the shoulders of the warrior astride him, the last light of day flashed like a sword. It was Semetey who came — risen up from Talas, sworn not to leave his father's blood unavenged on the ground, girded with Zulpukor, the sword that was his mother Kanıkey's gift. When he reached the camp he gave no greeting and asked no questions; Zulpukor came out of its sheath, came out and did not go down again until it had seen no more daylight. In an instant the herdsmen's camp became the end of the world. Those who fled were the ones who fled; those who stayed, stayed beneath the sword. Cauldrons overturned, felts caught fire, the herds shied at one end and rolled like a wave. Bozbala, in the terror of his dream made real, tumbled into a ditch and lay still, and so was among the living.

Karagul could not flee. Semetey caught him by the nape, dashed him to the ground, drove a knee into his chest, and tore his beard and mustache out by the fistful.

— Speak, dog of dogs! Where is Koñurbay? In what hole is that black serpent who struck my father from behind?

Karagul's soul rose to his throat; but life was sweet, and Karagul was a slave who had suckled cunning with his mother's milk. He moaned, he wept, he mingled his tears with the blood of his beard.

— Do not strike, my lion, do not slay me! I am of your own blood! My name is Coodur; I am a poor wretch driven out from among the Kirghiz and taken captive in these lands. For years upon years I have herded these dogs' horses and raved of Talas night and day. When I saw you my heart took wing; do not kill me — let me show you the way, let me

pick out the noblest of Koñurbay's tulpars and give it to you, let me pour out his secrets one by one.

Semetey was young; his heart was a lion's heart, but his ear could not yet pick out the footfall of a trap. He who grows up an orphan carries one wound that never closes: he is parched to hear a voice of his own blood. The years in Bukhara at the knee of his grandfather Temirkan, the years spent not knowing who he was, blew through his mind like a wind; and this man weeping before him, this voice that said I rave of Talas, came to that wound not as salt but as balm. He eased his knee.

— If you are of my blood, let me know it by your deeds, not your words. Get up. Show me the way.

Karagul rose, smoothed his bloodied beard, and all that night turned his sweet tongue to honey and circled about Semetey. He haltered one of the plainest, scrawniest horses of the herd: this horse, mark me, he said, do not be deceived by its looks — in water it is a fish, on rock a mountain goat; on this you will cross the river, and the tulpars will be waiting for you on the far bank. And as dawn broke he drove Semetey into the raging Sarı-Su, that thundering water the people call Kürpüldök. Within himself he was already keeping his black ledger: the young hero drowns, I cut out the best of the tulpars, take his head to Koñurbay — and from a slave I become a bey.

The Sarı-Su was yellow as its name and mad in its fury; swollen with the melted snows of spring, it had grown gluttonous. Before the scrawny horse reached midstream its knees gave way, and the current took them both like leaves. Semetey went under and came up, went under again; water filled his mouth and nose, and the weight of Zulpukor dragged him toward the bottom. The world went dark before his eyes; with his last strength he cried out once, and that cry was known by Taybuurul, left standing on the bank. The tulpar screamed, hurled itself into the water as if to snap its bridle; cleaving the foam, it reached its master and stretched out its long tail like a rope. Semetey's hand — the last of him above water — fastened on that tail. Taybuurul pulled; three times he pulled, and on the fourth he drew the hero out onto the sand.

Kneeling in the sand, vomiting the water from his lungs, Semetey looked to the bank: Karagul was gone. The cunning slave had leapt onto one of the finest horses and turned to dust on the road to Beecin. In that moment something caught fire inside Semetey; not rage alone, but shame as well. He drew from his saddlebag the Akolpok his mother had woven

on her knees through twelve years, the coat no arrow pierces and no sword cuts, and put it on; he leapt onto Taybuurul, found a ford upstream and crossed, and set off after Karagul.

The chase drove into the desert of Dıñşa. Of that desert they said: let a bird fly over it and its wings burn, let a wild ass cross it and its hooves drop off; the sand dunes rolled wave upon wave, and the sun was a red-hot copper tray. Whether it lasted three days or three nights, no one measured; Taybuurul's breath was a bellows, and Semetey's eye was fixed on a single distant shape. Karagul foundered the horse under him and leapt to the spare; when that one too was lathered to foam, he clung to Algara, Koñurbay's own tulpar. When the gate of the fortress of Beecin came into view, the distance between them had shrunk to a whip's length. Semetey reached out and grasped Algara's tail; the tulpar sprang forward, and the tail came away at the root in Semetey's hand. Karagul, by some black spell a charm-muttering sorcerer had given him, melted into a mist, and the fortress gate swung wide and swallowed him. Semetey sat a moment before the gate on his heaving horse, the horse's tail in his fist; then he turned Taybuurul's head. This gate, he said within himself, will one day open wide before me; if not today, then tomorrow.

At dawn Karagul flung himself down on the threshold of Koñurbay's gold-worked palace; his beard was plucked, his face was chalk, his voice was cracked.

— Khagan! Black news, khagan! Manas is dead, but his seed is not! He has a true son; his name is Semetey; he came, he cut down the herdsmen, he drove off half the herds, he tore out Algara's tail and carried it away in his hand! The blood you spilled at Kara-Suu, khagan, has put forth a shoot in Talas: the line of Manas lives!

✦ ✦ ✦

Koñurbay laughed first; laughed so that the pillars of the palace trembled. Then the laughter froze on his face and stayed there.

— What did you say? A son... of Manas?

He dashed his kumis bowl against the wall; the bowl flew to pieces. When he rose to his feet, his shadow covered the whole divan.

— I took that Manas by ambush; face to face, all the warriors of Beecin together would not have sufficed. And now his spawn comes battering at my gate, is that it? Be quick! Send word to all the beys: there is to be a campaign. Eighty days, I say; in eighty days arrows shall

be whittled, swords whetted, armor cast. In eighty days I shall march on Talas so that the bones of Manas will ache in his tomb. And for Algara... make my Algara a tail of gold. Gather the masters; let them hammer it strand by strand, let every hair of that tail be gold. Let the child of the Kirghiz see that even the hair he tears from Koñurbay turns to gold.

The divan dispersed, and Beecin became one great smith's forge. But the wolf inside Koñurbay did not rest even at night. When darkness fell he rose without a soul perceiving it; he slung Oçogor, that ill-omened long gun, over his shoulder, mounted the gold-tailed Algara, and slipped alone through the fortress gate. Waiting eighty days was work for the beys; his reckoning was his own reckoning: a serpent is crushed while it is young.

In those same hours Semetey, driving the herds he had taken before him, was descending by the Cañı-Cer road toward Kapka-Taş. All along the way his heart was not at ease; Karagul's flight sat in his breast like a thorn. He had called himself Coodur; he had called himself kinsman — would a kinsman drive a man into raging water? Who was enemy, who was friend; in these lands which word was honey and which word poison — until he learned to tell them apart, he would never set his teeth in Beecin. He stroked Taybuurul's mane; inwardly he gave thanks to the owner of the tail that had drawn him from the water, his one friend who could not speak. When the day reached noon he saw a rider at a bend of the road: an old man whose white beard fell to his chest, whose shoulders were bowed with years, but who still sat his saddle like a rock. It was Bakay — Manas's father-in-counsel, Semetey's guide upon the road, white-bearded Bakay. Bakay who had not bent even in those black years when Manas passed and the forty companions scattered and Abıke and Köböş betrayed the hearth; who alone had kept watch over the ash-covered embers until Semetey returned to Talas. Semetey spurred forward joyfully, bent, and kissed his hand. But Bakay's brows were knit; he cast one glance at the stolen herds, and his lip curled.

— Was it for this, my child? All this road, all this blood — for this handful of mares? Koñurbay's herds are as the sand of the sea; you have taken up one fistful of sand, and the sea remains where it was. A father's vengeance is not taken in horses; horses are the bone thrown before a dog. You have made the great cause small, Semetey.

Semetey's face flushed; he bowed his head. Bakay softened his voice, but did not spare his words.

— And I have news for you — evil news. Do you know Muradıl, son of Shah Kırmus, the wolf of Beecin? He has waylaid Külçoro and Kançoro and taken their horses from

under them; the two companions are now afoot on the steppe. The son of Almambet on foot, Semetey! That is a shame no arrow reaches and no sword answers; if we are not swift, the shame will be written in blood.

They rode on; toward evening they spread the herds to graze on the pasture at the foot of Kezençi, and Külçoro and Kançoro came trudging in on foot and were reunited with them — Külçoro's eyes all sparks, Kançoro's face, as always, an unreadable stone. Then the weight of all those days fell on Semetey at once: the water of the Sarı-Su, the sand of Dıñşa, the sleepless nights. Rest, my honey, said Bakay; the watch is ours, the sleep is yours. The young hero spread his felt at the foot of a rock, took Zulpukor into his bosom, and sank into the sleep of champions — that sleep of which they said it lasts seven days and seven nights, thunder does not wake it, swords may clash at the sleeper's side and he does not stir. The night of the steppe came down; the fire dwindled to embers, and the stars took their places one by one.

At midnight a shadow stirred on the ridge above the Kezençi pass. Koñurbay had tied Algara behind a rock, loaded Oçogor, and braced himself against the stone. Below, in the moonlight, he saw the sleeping Semetey — and at what he saw, his hand froze on the trigger. At the young man's head lay a tiger; at his feet, a lion; around him, woven perhaps of moonlight itself, forty faint shapes, the forty çilten, circled in a ring; and above them all stood an ancient one whose white beard shone — Kıdır himself — his hand stretched out over the sleeper's brow. In that instant something stirred in Koñurbay's hard heart. The sleeping face was not an enemy's face; it was a child's face — his own son, had he one, would sleep so. If I kissed that brow, said a voice within him; if I took this young lion for a son and set him on the throne of Beecin. One breath, two breaths... Then Koñurbay clenched his teeth and turned his heart to iron. From the seed of Manas no son will come to me, he said; he will grow, and it is not my tail he will tear off, but my head. He took aim at the very center of the chest; and he pulled the trigger.

The voice of Oçogor split the night in two. The tiger roared, the çilten scattered; the bullet, nudged from its path by no more than a breath at the last instant by Kıdır's hand, grazed Semetey's breast, searing a track of blood as it passed. The hero rose up covered in blood, his knees failed, he fell again. And out of the herds, from among the mares, a whirlwind broke loose: Külçoro. The son of Almambet had no time to reach for a weapon; he tore a young birch from the roadside, roots and all, took it on his shoulder with its earth and stones, and stormed barefoot up the ridge of the pass. Before Koñurbay could ram

home a second charge, the birch tree came down across his back; once, twice, three times. At the third blow the black champion barely flung himself onto Algara; the golden tail flashed once in the night, and then Koñurbay fled back into the darkness he had come from. Külçoro shouted after him:

— Run, Kalça! Run, that you may reach Beecin and tell what you have seen! Say the son of Almambet lives; say the son of Manas lives!

Then he ran to his elder brother. Semetey's lips were the color of ash, his breath thin as a thread. Külçoro drew from his breast the külazık that Kanıkey — whom he loved as a mother — had given him at the setting-out; that provision kneaded of forty wholesome essences and of prayer. He crushed it into water and let it fall drop by drop between the hero's teeth. One drop, two drops, three; at the third, Semetey's chest drew a deep breath, and his eyes opened a crack.

— The bullet... where did the bullet come from, Külçoro?

— From the pass, my aga. It was Koñurbay; he fled. Three times I measured his back with the birch; every jolt of the road to Beecin will make him remember me.

Bakay came up; he opened the wound in the daylight, and his face darkened, but his voice did not break. He spread the red medicine to stanch the blood and pressed on the black medicine to close the wound; he bound it with felt and wound a sash over it. Then with his own hands he dressed Semetey in the Akolpok and set him on Taybuurul; and while the old man's hands did this they were soft as a mother's hands, and when he gave his orders his voice was final as a khan's command.

— From this day let the swords find their masters, he said. Zulpukor stays with you, Semetey; your father's spirit walks in that steel. Açalbars to you, Kançoro; it is a heavy sword, and a heavy heart has need of it. And Coykuma to you, Külçoro; your wrist is fit for it, and its temper is fit for you.

Külçoro drew Coykuma a hand's-breadth from its sheath and looked into the water of the steel, kissed it, raised it to his brow; he whispered the name of his father Almambet. But Kançoro, as he girded on Açalbars, glanced from the corners of his eyes at Zulpukor; no one saw it — only nothing escaped the eye of Bakay, and the old man kept silent. The reckoning of that silence he wrote deep in his heart. You deal out one sword and you weigh three hearts; that was the work of old age, and one of the weighings that day had come up short.

At sunrise Bakay had the herds counted, and as they were counted his brows knotted: fourteen horses were missing — and the noblest of them, the tulpars fit for the brand. The old man read the tracks like a wolf that scents the ground.

— Muradıl, he said. He struck in the night. He has driven off fourteen horses and taken the Beecin road, and thousands of soldiers are behind him. And if he has sent a messenger ahead... — Bakay looked a moment into the distance, toward the sunrise — ...if he has, that messenger is Cööceldet. He goes on foot but outruns a horseman; his height is a fortress tower, his stride a river ford. If the news reaches Beecin, Koñurbay's eighty days will shrink to eight. I will cut him off; you guard the herds and the wounded man.

He mounted Kökçolok; streaming his white beard on the wind, he rode for the Beecin road. An old man of seventy went, and those who watched him go saw not an old man going, but a warrior drawn taut as a bow.

✦ ✦ ✦

Bakay caught Cööceldet at the crossing of a dry ravine. The giant executioner on foot was truly as they told of him: his shoulders were two hills, the iron staff in his hand the trunk of a plane tree; the ground shuddered at his step. Bakay planted himself in the middle of the road and crossed his spear before him.

— Halt, traveler. The road is closed from here on.

Cööceldet laughed; his laughter was the sound of rock breaking loose from a mountain.

— Stand aside, whitebeard. It is ill luck to kill a man of the dead men's age; but if you do not stand aside, I will not stop to consult your luck.

— I am Bakay, said the old man. Companion of Manas, road-father of Semetey. The news you carry is a thousand deaths; that news goes no farther than me.

— Bakay? — The giant checked a moment; even in the lands of Beecin that name was stirred into lullabies as a thing of fear. Then he shrugged; the man before him was, after all, a bent old man. — Manas is dead, whitebeard. The companion of a dead man is half dead himself.

— Then come, said Bakay, and measure how far the road runs from half dead to wholly dead.

The giant raised his staff and brought it down; where it came down, Bakay was not — Kökçolok had sprung aside. The staff buried itself in the earth, and in that one breath's pause Bakay's spear went in beneath the giant's collarbone and pierced his shoulder through. Cööceldet bellowed, wrenched his staff free, and swung it; the swing went wide, and the second spear-thrust found the tendon of his knee. Three times they circled one another, three times the dust flew up; at the third, Bakay drove his spear into the giant's breast with all his weight behind it. Cööceldet toppled, long and slow, like a felled plane tree. Bakay bared the sword Oykuma and finished the work; and he took by the halter the tulpar Köktelki that the giant had been leading behind him. Let this, he said within himself, be spoil for Kançoro; perhaps a tulpar may open a door in a heart of stone.

When he climbed the ridge to return, what he saw froze the old man's blood. Below, on the sandy flat of Dıñşa, the dust was wheeling in a circle, and in the middle of the circle a single rider was struggling: Külçoro. Muradıl's thousand champions had ringed the young companion in and were tightening the ring step by step. Muradıl's design Bakay would learn only later, but even in that moment he sensed it: the son of Shah Kırmus wanted the son of Almambet not dead but alive; he would set a golden crown on his head at Sazañşañ and make him a khan under the name of Kıtay, and so forge for the Kirghiz a chain out of their own blood. And over the sand there hung a cloud of black sorcery; yellow vapors were turning the head of Külçoro's horse and leading him astray.

Bakay was a sage — but a sage not of the sword alone; of the word and of the secret also. He loosed the old prayer from under his tongue, recited it into his palm, and blew it to the wind; the yellow vapor unraveled thread by thread and scattered. Then he sent Kökçolok down the slope at full gallop. In the same instant thunder came from the eastern edge of the plain: Semetey. He came with Akkelte, his father's hallowed gun, braced against his wounded breast, firing as he rode; and at every shot a rider toppled from the ring. From the other slope Kançoro appeared; Açalbars drawn, silent and heavy, he came down like a black cloud. Four heroes, from four sides, struck as one heart.

The dust of that struggle covered the sky. Külçoro dealt Coykuma to right and left and split the ring from within; Semetey pierced it from without; Kançoro widened the mouth of the wound; and Bakay — with his mind more than his sword — held the threads of the battle in his hand, crying out who should strike and where. The enemy beys went down one by one; at one moment Bakay was ringed round again, and Semetey, making a shield of his wounded breast, tore the old man out of the circle. The fourteen noble horses were

taken back from Muradıl's herd-keepers, and even in the midst of battle Bakay did not forget the law: the recovered tulpars were marked with the ear-brand handed down from the forefather Ogoy, so that whose property and whose line they were might be known until the day of judgment.

At the last, two horses remained on the field: Taybuurul under Semetey and Kılceerde under Muradıl. Muradıl, seeing no road of escape remained, turned; in his face there was neither fear nor pleading, only the dry glitter of a gambler casting his final die.

— Spawn of Manas! he cried. Your father too stood against us so; his end came from ambush, from behind. Yours will come the same way — if not today, tomorrow; if not from me, from one greater than I!

— My father's end they brought by ambush, said Semetey; his voice was strange even to his own ear, flat as stone. Yours I bring face to face. Ask the earth the difference.

Muradıl came on with leveled spear. The two spears crossed in the air; at the first shock both men kept their saddles, at the second Muradıl's spear glanced off the Akolpok; at the third Semetey set the Sır spear beneath his adversary's ribs, and the son of Shah Kırmus toppled from Kılceerde like a dry branch. Külçoro leapt from his horse and stood over the fallen man.

— Do you know my father Almambet? he said; the voice was not his own voice, it came up as from the bottom of wells. My father, whom I lost on the road to Beecin? This head, in the place of his head.

Coykuma came down once. Külçoro fulfilled that ancient oath which those who know the law recall with a shudder: he swallowed one mouthful of his enemy's black blood, that the vengeance might settle into his heart and never leave it. Then he led Kılceerde, that dark bay held to be a horse of ill omen, into the middle of the field.

— This horse, he said, is a sacrifice to the spirit of the fathers. For the spirit of Manas my forefather!

And the rite of sacrifice was fulfilled. Over the steppe the red of evening hung like a veil of blood; the four weary heroes stood silent a while among the dead men and the horses. Then Bakay gave the word; fires were kindled, cauldrons were set, and the victory board was spread.

✦ ✦ ✦

The board was spread, true enough — the meat was lifted from the cauldrons, the kumis skins were opened; Külçoro was asking after the height and girth of Cööceldet, Bakay was waving it away with an old man's modesty, and that stiff, tired gaiety of men just come from battle was circling the fire. But the black news came not from the enemy — it came from within. As Semetey raised the kumis bowl to his lips, his hand shook; the bowl fell, the hero doubled over, and with his cough a handful of blood came onto the felt. Bakay sprang up, opened the wound, probed it; his fingers touched a hardness deep behind the breastbone, a hardness that did not move, and the blood drained from the old man's face.

— The bullet of Oçogor, he said hoarsely. We thought it grazed; it did not graze. It has lodged behind the breastbone. This sickness is what the ancients called korkok: the bullet wanders within, it makes a man vomit blood, it lays the hero on his bed and snuffs him out day by day.

— The cure, said Külçoro; he did not ask, he begged. Name its cure, Bakay-ata. If it lies at the other end of the world, I will go.

Bakay was long silent. The firelight played in his white beard. At last he raised his head; in his eyes were hope and shame together, for the remedy he had to name was not a remedy to be won by the sword.

— The cure for this sickness neither grows on the mountain nor comes with the caravan. I know one road only, left us by the ancients: a woman of miraculous power, bound to him heart to heart, must leap over the sick man from the quarter the shot came from; the miracle draws the bullet loose, and the sickness flows out. And in this world that woman is one: the daughter of Akun Han, betrothed to Semetey in the cradle, his fate-written mate, Ayçürök of the swan plumage. If she comes and leaps over him, my lion rises. If she does not come...

He did not finish; there was no need to finish. Külçoro was already on his feet.

— I will go to Talas.

That night Bakay wrote the letter with his own hand, heated his seal and pressed it; he had six swift horses drawn up as remounts. Külçoro mounted Surkoyon; Kançoro stayed at the head of the board, looking into the fire, and what was in the eyes that looked into the fire no one could read that night either. As he left, the young rider turned once and looked at his elder brother; Semetey lay in the firelight, his chest barely rising and falling, and in

that moment Külçoro swore an oath to himself: if this road swallows me, let it swallow me; if I return empty-handed, let my name not be Külçoro. Then he took the road; he stitched day to night and night to day. When a horse tired he leapt to a remount; when the remounts were spent he returned to Surkoyon; when sleep bore down on him he laid his brow on the pommel of the saddle and slept the space of a breath, and traveled on even in his dream. He crossed the Dıñşa, he passed the passes, and when he heard the voice of the Talas river, all seven of the seven days lay behind him.

The white palace at Talas was ringed at midnight by the shadows of seventy executioners; Ayçürök had been guarded so ever since the affliction of Çınkoco and Toltoy, and they said no bird could fly in through those gates. Külçoro left the horses in the grove and went on foot; he flowed from shadow to shadow, slipped through the breath's-width gap between two sentries, climbed the wall by its ivy, and at midnight, the sealed letter in his hand, knelt on the threshold of Ayçürök's white pavilion. The confidante Bıytı drew breath to scream; Ayçürök raised her hand and stopped the scream in the air. She looked at the face of the one who had come; she looked at the seal; she knew the seal, and as she read the letter the tears ran down her white face.

— So he lies stricken, she said. So my lion carries a bullet in his breast. — Then she lifted her head, looked at Külçoro, and poured out in one night what she had gathered within her for years: — You cannot know, çoro; I chose Semetey before my eyes ever saw him. When Çınkoco and Toltoy besieged our palace, when my father Akun Han's white beard swept the ground, I put on my swan plumage and circled the world from the sky. I saw khans, I saw beys; this one's heart was narrow, that one's shadow was short. Then I came to a Talas, and I saw a young hero on whose brow light walked even in his sleep. It was then I chose my cradle-betrothed with my heart as well; and the siege was scattered by the wind of his name. If he lies stricken now, it is forbidden for Ayçürök to sit here.

She rose; grave, resolved.

— Bıytı, open the chest. Bring my swan plumage.

Bıytı's hands trembled as she lifted the lid of the chest.

— My lady — what of the executioners? What if your father Akun Han wakes and —

— If my father wakes, said Ayçürök, you will tell him: your daughter has flown to her fate. No executioner bars the swan's road, Bıytı; and you are with me — do not fear. If I

sleep on my right side while my fate-written mate lies on the sickbed, I am no daughter of Akun Han.

She took the white plumage onto her shoulders; and when she had taken it and shaken herself, the pavilion filled with the roar of wings. Two white swans, one before and one behind, rose above the white palace; seventy executioners stood gaping at the sky, and before they could even think to lower their spears, the birds had mingled with the stars. In that same hour, in the ordo across the Talas, a light still burned: Kanıkey, who had known by the ache of her own heart that her son had fallen to his bed before any word came, was bent night and day without distinction over armor no arrow could pierce; at every dip and rise of her needle a prayer fell from her lips. The white swans beat their wings toward the sunrise, toward the land where the sick lion lay; and the bullet, behind Semetey's breastbone, waited — silent, and patient.

CHAPTER 24

The Wing of the White Swan and the Little Campaign

— ❖ —

As dawn paled over Talas, the hearth in Kanıkey's grey yurt had still not gone out. The woman had sat the whole night without closing an eye, going over one last time, with a mother's exactness, the campaign gear heaped at her knees. Forty years before she had fitted out Manas for the Great Campaign in just this way; now the same hands, with the same patience, were fitting out Külçoro, son of Almambet. First she took up the grey coat; seven years she had beaten its felt herself, twisted its silk herself, stitched prayer into its seams. No arrow passed through that coat; a sword's stroke slid from it, a spear's thrust glanced away.

— Put this on, she said, and never take it from your back. Your mother Aruuke's milk and the tears of my eyes are steeped in its stitching. Seven years ago, when I was beating this felt, you were still a child chasing foals; even then I knew this day would come. A woman's eye sees far ahead, my foal; it sees, and her tongue does not speak of it, and her hands work.

Then she held out the sword. This was the work of the lame master Bölökbay — that Bölökbay who in his youth had hammered the shoes of Manas's horses, who had been shot through the knee in a raid and left lame, but whose hand had lost not one grain of its craft. Kanıkey had brought him black steel by caravan from Samarkand; the master had laid that steel three months in the fire and rested it three months in water, and hammered it at his bellows until his knees would no longer hold him. He had quenched it in mare's milk and read prayers as he honed its edge. Ak Tinte they called this sword; its sheath was of birchwood, its hilt of white silver, and the watering of its steel played in waves in the sunlight. Kanıkey had also had four moon-axes made for the four warriors — their crescents gold-cheeked, their hafts of birch heartwood. And there was külazık besides. Kanıkey had prepared it over a full year: she had rendered the tail-fat of nine sheep, roasted wheat over embers and kneaded it with marrow, folded in the essence of holy herbs gathered from seven high pastures of the Ala-Too, and dried it all forty days in the shade. A handful of it kept a warrior on his feet for seven days; one lump of it raised a man from his deathbed; let years pass, it neither spoiled nor moldered. While Manas lived he had carried it to the Great Campaign; the warriors called it walking bread. With her own hands she packed the bundles of arrows and the powder pouches into the pockets of the grey saddlebag, and bound its mouth with seven knots.

Külçoro stood at the threshold and bent his knee before the white-haired woman. Kanıkey took his head between her two palms; in that face she saw Almambet's brow and the gaze of Manas, and her throat closed.

— Your road is long, your enemy is thick, she said. But hang my word on your ear like an earring: if you have not returned by the seventh month, I will not live one more day in this Talas. I will tear out my white hair and go into the black earth. Do not let the seventh month pass, my foal.

— I will not let it pass, ene, said Külçoro. Though my bones remain behind, my word will come home.

Surkoen was pawing in the courtyard; his dun mane rippled in the dawn wind, his hoof struck sparks from the stone like flint. When Külçoro set foot in the stirrup and settled onto his horse, the women of Talas were ranged along the thresholds and the old men had opened their hands. Kanıkey sprinkled white milk after him and poured out prayers along the road. Until the rider's silhouette dissolved at the mouth of the Keñ-Kol, no one stirred from their place.

That day Ayçürök too could not rest where she was. She was the daughter of Akun Khan; she was of the swan line, and when need came she could change her form and make the sky her homeland. For days an ache had settled in her: Semetey's face kept entering her dreams covered in blood; and the night before she had seen a black river, and over the river a falcon with one broken wing, circling. She went to Kanıkey and told her dream; the two women exchanged a look, and there was no need for words. Kanıkey wrapped the medicine pouches and the golden tweezers in a little bundle and placed it with her own hand in her daughter-in-law's bosom; the greater store she had already loaded on Külçoro with the grey saddlebag. Ayçürök put on her white swan plumage; when her wings spread, a white cloud wheeled above the grey yurts, then rose, and crossed the snowy teeth of the Ala-Too. Three days and three nights she flew; the frost of the snow passes froze her feathers, the desert wind scorched her wings, still she did not fall. Her eyes searched the ground without ceasing: a smoke, a hoofprint, a human shape. On the fourth day, on the bank of a nameless river, she saw a tent with a beaten slope before it; and before the tent an old man, sunk upon his knees, was tearing out his white beard.

It was Bakay. And inside the tent, on the felt, lay Semetey: his face ash, his lips cracked, in his chest Koñurbay's steel arrow. The hero was vomiting black blood; at every cough black flowers opened on the felt. Bakay's lament mingled with the voice of the river:

— My Manas, my lion, my friend of the world to come! We were together in the Altay, together in Talas; I opened your road, you opened my heart. "So long as my elder brother Bakay lives, my son shall never be an orphan," you said; behold, your brother lives, and your son lies on the bed of death! You went and I remained; I remained — and what have I seen? I hold your son's blood in my palm; I have no place to pour it, no vessel to keep it. My white beard drags upon the ground; take me too to your side — do not leave old Bakay to these black days!

A shadow fell from the sky; the white swan settled on a river stone, shook itself, the feathers fell away, and Ayçürök stood there. Bakay raised his head; his eyes, gone blind with weeping, kindled for a moment.

— My swan, have you come? My daughter, my hope, have you come?

Ayçürök gave no answer; she went straight into the tent and knelt at her husband's head. Semetey's eyelids parted, he knew his wife, he tried to smile; blood came again from his mouth.

— Do not speak, said Ayçürök. You keep silence; let me do the work.

From her bosom she drew the golden tweezers. It was the tweezers Kanıkey had laid in her bridal chest; its point fine as a hair, its grip strong as an eagle's talon. She washed the mouth of the wound with kumis, parted the flesh with two fingers, and sent the tweezers in. Semetey's body drew taut as a bow, but he made no sound; a man swallows pain and hides it behind his teeth. Three times the point of the tweezers slipped; on the fourth it took hold. Ayçürök, without drawing breath, without a tremor of her hand, pulled slowly, slowly; and the steel arrowhead came out from three joints deep, with its bloody root. Koñurbay's mark was upon it; Bakay, seeing that mark, clenched his teeth and said nothing. Ayçürök flung the arrowhead into the river; even the river foamed as if in loathing.

Then she opened Kanıkey's medicines: the black decoction was poured into the wound, the red salve spread over it. The black medicine worked into the marrow, the red medicine drew the flesh together; before the sun set the mouth of the wound had closed, and by midnight the blood had come back into Semetey's face.

The next evening the sound of hooves came from down the river. Bakay reached for his spear, then lowered his hand: it was Surkoen who came, Külçoro on his back, the grey saddlebag behind the saddle. The young warrior had tracked and traced all the way, asked of mountain and stone, and found at last the tent on the riverbank. The moment he was off his horse he ran to his elder brother's side; when he saw Semetey's open eyes and closed wound his knees gave way, and he gave thanks and laid his brow to the earth. The grey saddlebag was opened; Kanıkey's külazık had arrived at its exact hour. Ayçürök crushed a handful of it into kumis and fed it to him spoon by spoon; as dawn broke the hero raised himself on his elbow, and before noon he was on his feet. Nor was Buurul far from death himself; struck down with his master, wasted with his master, his ribs had grown countable. Ayçürök took the holy herb from the saddlebag, rubbed it in her palm, smeared it on the horse's tongue, and mixed the rest into his barley. Before three days had passed, Buurul shook himself and neighed; and the neigh came rolling back from the facing slopes. Külçoro delivered Kanıkey's trusts one by one: the four moon-axes were shared out to the four warriors, the arrow bundles and powder pouches divided; the grey coat stayed on his own back, Ak Tinte at his own waist.

On the seventh day Semetey stood upright on the riverbank. He faced the rising sun, drove his sword into the earth, and laid both hands on the hilt.

— My father's blood shall not lie on the ground, he said. Until Manas, struck down by ambush at Kara-Kapçal, is avenged, homeland is forbidden me, sleep is forbidden me,

kumis is forbidden me. I go to Beecin; if I return without the head of Koñurbay, may my name as a man wither.

Bakay's heart leapt to his mouth. The old man took the hero's two hands:

— My foal, wait; hear my word. I have seen that Beecin. I saw the Great Campaign; I counted the mighty warriors who followed your father, and I counted those who returned. How Muzburçak fell, I saw with my own eyes: his shield was shattered, his horse went down, forty kalday swarmed over him. How Kökçö fell, I saw with my own eyes: six arrows in his chest, a broken sword in his hand, he died with his face turned toward Talas. Beecin is a well, my foal; you pour armies in, it swallows armies, and it is never filled. With four men Beecin is not taken. Come, let us turn back to Talas; let us send word to Ümötöy, to the line of Koşoy, let us gather an army, and go then.

Külçoro's brows drew together; the young lion sprang from his place:

— Turn back, aba? Did Kanıkey-ene stitch us this coat that we might turn back? Did master Bölökbay forge Ak Tinte to gather rust in its sheath? My father Almambet lies on the Beecin road; his bones are in that soil, and his vengeance is on my neck. If I turn back, may the mother whose milk I drank withhold her blessing. If we die, we die a man's death; but there is no turning back.

Bakay looked from one warrior to the other; in the eyes of both he saw the same fire, and he fell silent. He knew that fire; it had burned forty years in the eyes of Manas. The old man looked to the sky and pleaded within himself: "May Kıdır be their companion; may the çilten spread their wings over them."

The warriors armed themselves. Semetey drew Akkelte from its case and oiled it; this was the gun come down from his father, and whoever looked into its barrel could not look away. Bakay stroked the gun and remembered the old days:

— Whoever once hears the voice of this Akkelte never forgets it, my foal. In the Great Campaign its fire made the mountains echo; how many kalday one single bullet finished, a lifetime was not enough to count. Your father kept it beneath his pillow and said, "This is half my homeland." Now it is on your shoulder; know its weight.

Semetey listened; he crossed the gun's strap over his chest, and it was as if he had taken his father's arm about his shoulders.

The time came to send Ayçürök on her way. Semetey looked long into his wife's face:

— You return to Talas. My mother Kanıkey is alone, her eyes are on the roads. Know us living; wait for us living.

Ayçürök made no protest; the women of the swan line did not open their mouths against fate. Only, as they parted, she laid her brow against her husband's chest:

— Do not forget the seventh month, she said. A mother's word is word.

The white swan climbed into the sky, circled three times above the tent, then glided away westward, toward Talas. On the riverbank four men remained: Semetey, Külçoro, Bakay, and young Kançoro, son of Çubak; four men, four horses, and one endless road running east.

✦ ✦ ✦

Over Çet-Beecin that day the drums were beating. The fortress of the Keçil khan, of Koñurbay son of Alööke, could be seen from nine days' journey; its towers touched the clouds, and the voice of its gate-bell was heard nine days away. Let that bell be struck once, and the envoys of forty khans leapt to horse; let it be struck a second time, and the armies of forty khans formed up on the road. The fortress within was a city entire: in its granaries forty years of grain, in its stables ten thousand mules, in its dungeons captives who had never seen the light of day. Koñurbay sat cross-legged on the white stone dais of his ordo, surveying the champions ranged before him: the giant Tokuşker on his grey mule at their head; beside him Orokbaş, monster son of Şıpşaydar; behind them Matı, whose single eye gaped like a bucket; and many another besides — a wall of flesh and iron.

— Hear me, said Koñurbay; his voice was like the bronze of the bell. Who removed Manas, the lion of the Buruts, from this world? I removed him. I laid my ambush in the gorge of Kara-Kapçal; as he passed, trusting in that tulpar of his, I drove my spear into his flank. The warrior who made the world tremble withered on the point of my spear. Now in his place a boy has appeared — Semetey, they say his name is; and beside him the bastard of Almambet, and old Bakay whose hands and feet barely obey him. They are four; and all four have dug their own graves.

The champions burst out laughing; the fortress boomed.

— Send word to the peoples of the forty khans, said Koñurbay. Set their men on horseback; have their women bind up the loads. Let this campaign be called the Little

Campaign — little, because our quarry is little. We shall crush the Buruts, we shall plunder Talas; we shall make Kanıkey a slave and Ayçürök a concubine. Whoever returns without finding the tomb of Manas and dashing its stones one against another is no man of mine.

The bell was struck; the nine days' road trembled. The envoys of the forty khans flew to the forty quarters, and the armies of the forty quarters poured into Çet-Beecin. Six thousand chosen Hıtay took horse; their armor black, their spears painted, their mounts matched. As for the kalday, no scribe could write their number and no counter count it; they came with their winnowing-forks, their axes, their sickles with scorched hafts; most of them knew nothing of war — they were a multitude driven toward death; but a multitude too is a weapon, and Koñurbay knew well how to wield that weapon.

✦ ✦ ✦

Koñurbay marched his army through the desert of Dıñşa. Scorching is that desert; its sand is live coal, its wind is flame, its shade is mirage; they say a bird flying over it catches fire at the wing, and a wolf entering it finds its tongue cleaving to its palate. Three days and three nights the flood marched; the mules hung out their tongues, the horses sweated blood, and the kalday who fell behind were covered by the sand — no one turned to look, for behind them was Koñurbay's whip, and that whip was worse than the desert.

At that hour of dawn, on the Koş-Moynok summit of Mount Eçki-Ölbös, an old man stood with his hand shading his eyes, looking east. Bakay knew nothing of sleep on campaign; by night he counted the stars, by day he read the horizon. First he saw a dust: thin, stealthy, like a snake. Then within the dust he made out a shape: he knew Algara, Koñurbay's black tulpar; he had seen that horse's stride forty years before, and he had not forgotten it. Behind the dust came the rest: the spear-forest of six thousand Hıtay, and behind that the shape of the kalday without edge or end, filling the space between earth and sky as it came.

The old man came down from the summit and roused the warriors:

— Rise. Koñurbay is coming. I knew Algara's dust; forty years may pass, I do not forget. Six thousand chosen Hıtay I counted; to count the kalday, my lifetime was not enough. The earth cannot carry them, my foals; the dust has eaten half the sky.

Semetey did not flinch. He knew the custom of his father Manas: a campaign is begun with blood and entered with prayer. They led up the seven-year-old mare; Semetey drew the white knife and felled the sacrifice, and poured the blood upon the earth.

— Spirit of my father, he said, may your arbak be with us.

Bakay opened his hands; his prayer went round the mountains:

— May Kıdır walk before you; may the forty çilten stand at your right hand and your left; may the arbak of Manas be your shield and the spirit of Almambet your sword. Say amen, my warriors.

— Amen, said the three men; three voices became one voice.

Külçoro tightened his horse's girth, then turned and looked into each of the three faces in turn; he was a boy of eighteen, but his gaze was a hundred years old.

— My word is in your keeping, he said. If I die, do not leave my bones in this black earth; load them on Surkoen, carry them to Talas. Kanıkey-ene's stitching I hold for my shroud; the soil of Talas I hold for my homeland. Let us take our leave.

They embraced; the embrace of warriors is short — bones crack, and nothing is said. Then Külçoro spurred Surkoen and rode down alone to the stone field of Kara-Döbö. The field was a flat palm of land between the two armies; the blood of many a warrior had licked those stones, and would lick them yet.

Koñurbay sent Tokuşker out before his ranks. On his grey mule the giant was like a mountain; his helmet a barrel, his spear a pine trunk. He laughed as he came down to the field:

— Is this the Burut's champion? His beard has not even sprouted. I will spit you on my spear, boy, and send you home to your mother!

Külçoro made no answer; on the field of single combat it is not the tongue that speaks but the arm. The two mounts burst forward from either side; in the middle of the field two spears came down as one, and both shattered like logs on the shields. Mule and horse crashed chest against chest, and neither went down. Tokuşker roared and drew his moon-axe; Külçoro was quicker. The gold-cheeked moon-axe Kanıkey had given him turned once in the air and came down on the giant's helmet; the bronze helmet split like a gourd, and the giant, his brain shaken, slumped over his mule's neck. Külçoro bared Coykuma, the six-times-tempered sword left him by his father Almambet; one sweep, and Tokuşker's head fell to the stone field, and his body toppled after it like a mountain falling.

A moan went up from the Hıtay ranks; Koñurbay ground his teeth and sent out his second champion. Orokbaş came to the field: the monster son of that Şıpşaydar whom Manas had slain in his day; blood-hunger for his father's vengeance had filled his eye, and he seemed less of human skin than of some beast's. This fight was not soon over. Six days they grappled; they broke spears, they blunted swords, they shattered maces; six days the two armies watched without drawing breath, and at night no one spoke around the fires. Toward the evening of the sixth day Külçoro wheeled Surkoen suddenly; Orokbaş's lunge went into the empty air, and into his opened chest Külçoro's spear drove with all its speed, standing out a hand's-breadth from his back. The monster's monster son, like his father before him, measured his length on the earth at a Burut's hand.

Koñurbay went out of his mind. With one sweep of his whip he broke the law of single combat:

— All of you at once! he bellowed. Crush the four of them and pass over!

Six thousand Hıtay, with the flood of the kalday behind them, poured onto Kara-Döbö. But what met them was not four men — it was four whirlwinds. Into old Bakay's arm that day his youth came back; he swung his spear so that he skewered two champions on one shaft and took the pair of them from their horses at a stroke. Semetey had girded on the Akolpok armor of his father Manas; taking Buurul's rein between his teeth, he plunged in with a sword in either hand; the rank he entered split, and where he wheeled, the ground emptied. Külçoro mowed from the left, Kançoro from the right. Seven days the slaughter lasted; for seven days no day dawned and no night darkened — there was no season but dust and blood. The blood rose to the horses' knees; the broken spear-shafts lay like stubble in a field. At night the four warriors slept by turns, two standing watch; Bakay shared out the külazık, bound their wounds with his own hands, and put heart into them: "A little longer, my foals — the enemy's knees will fail before ours." On the seventh day the great army broke; kalday trampled kalday, Hıtay crushed Hıtay, and the flood fled back the way it had come.

When Koñurbay saw the rout, he drew the jay stone from his bosom. It was a stone of sorcery; read over, it pierced the sky and turned a summer's day to winter. Koñurbay read over the stone and struck it on the ground: fog fell suddenly on the mountains, hail burst out of the fog like fists, and at midday a darkness like pitch came down. In that darkness Koñurbay turned Algara's head toward Beecin and fled; he gave not one thought to the rear of his own army. The rearguard, caught in the trap, found themselves when the fog lifted in

the midst of the four warriors; their khan fled, their road cut, the strength gone from their weapon-hands, they were slaughtered as sheep are slaughtered. When evening came down, the stones of Kara-Döbö had earned their name; the four warriors climbed the crown of the hill and looked out over the steppe, and the steppe as far as the eye could reach was carrion and iron. Bakay opened his hands and prayed even over the enemy dead; the dead are the dead, he said, whoever's son a man may be, he has a mother; more than that he did not say.

Koñurbay, reaching Beecin, never took the word defeat into his mouth; and whoever did take the word defeat into his mouth, he had his tongue cut out. He mustered his army anew and sent criers into the squares:

— This campaign is named the Little Gaza! Dig trenches seven rope-lengths deep, roof them with brushwood, plant stakes in their floors. Let the armies of the forty khans be one head. We will take Talas; we will make the Burut's men slaves and his women bondmaids. Swear the oath!

While the armies were swearing, they brought before the throne a man returned from the rout: he was the chief marksman of the treasury, and in all Beecin no man was accounted his better with the bow; now his armor hung in shreds and his eyes were still wide with the horror of what they had seen. He knelt, and spoke without lifting his head:

— My khan, he said, I was on that field. The son of Almambet swung one spear and ran six masters through on a single shaft; I saw it with my own eyes — six on one shaft. And as for Semetey... My khan, I am a man who saw Manas in the Great Campaign. This boy has surpassed his father. My word is my word: with this one there is no making war. Let us pay the blood-price for the blood of Manas; let us give gold, let us give yambı, let us make peace. Otherwise not one stone of Beecin will stand upon another.

✦ ✦ ✦

A murmur ran through the divan; the word blood-price passed from mouth to mouth. Some nodded; some, afraid to look Koñurbay in the face, looked at the ground before them. Then a man stepped forward: the executioner Cööceldet. His life had passed at dungeon doors, in the shadow of the cleaver; he was a man of bloody work. At Kara-Döbö,

Külçoro's spear had grazed his flank and passed on, and he had come back from death by a hair; the wound still ached, but the tongue still served.

— My khan, he said, the marksman speaks truly: by war it cannot be done. But let us pay no blood-price either; let us work by guile. I know the way of it: let us send out fair girls to meet them, with poisoned boza in their hands. A weary warrior does not refuse hospitality; let them drink, let them sleep. To cut a sleeper's throat is easy; I will do the cutting — my hand is practiced.

Koñurbay rose from his place so that the dais shook. He seized the executioner by the collar and lifted him into the air:

— Poison, is it? Girls, is it? Would you have Koñurbay serve boza to his enemy, you cowardly dog! Who do you take me for? I am Bahadır Kalça, who slaughtered the Manas before whom the world trembled! I took that head with my spear, and I will take his son's head with my spear. Out of my sight; and if the word guile passes your lips once more, I will have your tongue torn out by the root.

They kicked the executioner down from the dais. Koñurbay gave the army the order to march; now there was no blood-price and no guile; there was only hatred — and number: the forty armies of the forty khans, a multitude the earth could not carry.

That multitude, once again, Bakay was the first to see. He had climbed the hill and was watching the coming flood; it was no flood — it was as if the sea had overrun its shores; its edge touched the horizon, its end could not be seen. The old man came down and planted himself before Semetey; this time his knees were trembling, and his voice too.

— My foal, look on this calamity that comes. Against this number four men cannot fight; for this, not man's strength but mountain's strength would not suffice. Hear me: let us withdraw to Talas. There is Ümötöy, son of Kökötöy; send him word and he takes horse. There is the line of old Koşoy — from the land of Katagan they will rise and come. There are the lands of the five khans; there is Töştük son of Eleman; all of them have eaten the salt of Manas, all of them stand in his debt. Let us gather through one winter, and in spring we come with a hundred thousand men. Then neither Koñurbay remains, nor Beecin.

Semetey looked at the coming sea; in his face there was neither fear nor wavering.

— Aba, he said, your word is white, your mind is white; but my road is one. Rather than flee and wander and die in my bed, let me die here fighting. Did my father Manas ever

flee? If his son flees, the bones in his tomb will ache. Take the herds and set out on the Talas road; watch over my mother Kanıkey and over our people. We stay here.

Bakay pleaded, he beat his breast — it was no use; a warrior's word is rock, and he could not turn it. He looked to Külçoro; Külçoro bowed his head but did not open his mouth. He looked to Kançoro; Kançoro turned his eyes away. All three would stay; the old man understood it, pressed a stone upon his heart, and turned the head of the herds toward Talas. Then he turned back and looked one last time at the three warriors; on each of them his eye lingered the space of a separate lifetime. He drew the white-hilted dagger from his bosom and raised it to the sky:

— Let this be my oath: if word of your death touches my ear, I myself will drive this white dagger into my own breast. Stay alive, my foals; do not make old Bakay a liar.

The dust of the herds thinned westward and was wiped away. The old man's back grew smaller and smaller; a moment came when he was a point in the endlessness of the steppe, and then that too was gone. Three men remained on the field; before them an enemy the size of the world, above them an indifferent sky.

This time Koñurbay sent Matı to the field. Matı was a giant with a single eye opened like a bucket in the middle of his brow; his stride leapt trenches, his breath raised dust. As Koñurbay sent him out, he poured the poison of hatred into his ear:

— Matı, he said, you know my father Alööke. He was a great khan; his throne was of gold, his pavilion of silk. Manas came, scattered his army, drove my father in flight from his own ordo. And did he escape by fleeing? They caught him, they bound his hands, they threw him before the raging dogs; the dogs tore the great khan apart, and no one gathered up his bones. From that day I have not slept at night. And now that Manas's son stands before you. Take my vengeance for me; take it, and the khanate of Çet-Beecin is yours — I myself will seat you on its throne.

Matı's single eye turned to a bowl of blood; the giant strode to the field shaking the earth. At every step of his the stones jumped, and the iron mace in his hand swung like a shepherd's cudgel. The three men exchanged a glance; Semetey gave a sign with his head. But Külçoro had already braced Sırbaran, the gun left him by his father Almambet, against his knee. He took aim; the giant's single eye stood in the middle of his brow like a platter. Sırbaran spoke once; the mountains answered. The bullet lodged in the dead center of the bucket eye; the giant clutched his face with both hands and bellowed, and at his bellowing the horses shied. As the blinded giant flailed and groped, Semetey leveled the Sır spear and

drove Buurul forward; the spear went into the giant's chest, and the huge body came down like a fortress tower falling. Külçoro rode up, drew Zulpukor, the sword come down from Manas; with one sweep he parted Matı's head from his body, and took the giant's grey mule by the halter for spoil.

Seeing this, the worm entered Koñurbay's heart. Semetey's terribleness grew and grew in his eye: the sheen of the Akolpok, the foam of Buurul, that gaze... the gaze of Manas. Bahadır Kalça, the warrior who had slaughtered his Manas, turned Algara's head; he rode for the black crags, climbed by a goat track, and passed from sight. He did not so much as look at his army.

The khan had fled, but the army remained; number, even masterless, was still number. Semetey brought Akkelte down from his shoulder. As his father's gun took fire, the ranks of the Kıtay were mowed like standing grain; one bullet felled a rank, and before its smoke had scattered, the second rank fell. Eleven days this slaughter lasted; eleven days three men drove an army the size of the world before them. Many a great one fell in those days: Madı khan fell, Şıyka khan fell; the standards toppled, the drums went silent. At night the three warriors leaned back to back to draw breath; Külçoro tended the horses' wounds, Semetey divided what little remained of the külazık into three; Kançoro's eyes were sinking deeper and deeper into their pits and his tongue growing heavier — but no one had strength to spare for that. Yet the land of the Kıtay was a boiling cauldron; the more you cut, the more it overflowed; the more you poured off, the fuller it rose. On the evening of the eleventh day a new darkness showed on the horizon: a flood five times worse than the first — fresh, unwearied, without edge or end, seething as it came.

From behind the black crag Koñurbay too appeared once more; he had found the way to make his flight forgotten. He set his criers shouting through the army:

— It is the khan's command: to whoever takes Külçoro, son of Almambet, alive shall be given the khanate of Uluñçu-Dıñşa! Alive, I say; let not a hair of him be harmed; let him kneel before me. Masters of the lasso, masters of the net — forward!

At those words the plunderer's eye filled with blood; the promise of a khanate conquered the fear of death. The lasso-masters loosed their ropes, the net-masters unwound their silken nets; ring upon ring they gathered on Külçoro's four sides. The first lasso whistled in the air; Külçoro ducked, the rope went wide. The second he cut in the air with Ak Tinte. The third came, the fourth, the fifth; the sky filled with rope. The young lion drove Surkoen to the four quarters, split through, broke out; but behind every ring he

split there stood another ring. He was torn away from Semetey and Kançoro; in the dust and smoke the distance between them widened and widened; he called out, and his voice drowned in the dust. There came a moment when Külçoro drew rein and stopped and looked about him: the encirclement had grown forty-two deep; forty-two rings of men and rope and silken net, narrowing, ever narrowing. In the sky the red of evening and on the earth the red of blood had run together. For one instant the threshold at Talas rose before his eyes: Kanıkey-ene, her palms pressed to her temples, and her voice in his ear saying, if you have not returned by the seventh month, I die.

The young lion stroked Surkoen's sweat-soaked neck; under his palm the animal's heart was beating like a drum.

— So this is how it is, he said to himself; his voice was calm, like the voice of a child. Kanıkey-ene said seven months. It seems I came here not to fight, but to die.

He bared Coykuma from its sheath; the six-times-tempered steel flashed once in the last light of evening. The forty-two rings began to close, like one mouth, upon the single rider at their center.

CHAPTER 25

The Siege of Talas and the Field of Champions

— ❖ —

The plain before Beecin knew no color but blood that day. Dust swallowed the sun; the drumming of hooves smothered the thunder of the sky. The iron-helmed warriors of the Manchu, shoulder to shoulder with the yellow-robed soldier-monks, were weaving ring upon ring around a single horseman. Forty-two deep the encirclement had grown; forty-two iron circles nested one within another. At its center, on his grey horse, Külçoro wheeled and turned; his sword flew from flank to flank, yet for every man who fell, three sprang up in his place. They cast ropes at him, they hurled lassoes; they meant to take Almambet's son alive, to bind him living and lay him at Konurbay's feet. Nor was the Cripple himself far off; astride Algara, his bronze lance propped upon his knee, he waited like a wolf that waits for its prey to tire.

Semetey saw it from the hilltop. He saw it, and blood flooded his eyes.

— Manas! he cried. Not once but three times he cried it: — Manas! Manas! Manas!

That war-cry rolled across the plain from end to end; the name of a dead lion came alive again in the hearts of the living. Semetey drew the golden collar of the Akolpok tight to his throat, clamped the Sırnayza under his arm, and struck his horse's flank such a blow of the whip that the beast shot forward like an arrow loosed from the bow. He was alone; before him stood an army that covered the earth. He cared nothing for it. His father's blood ran through his veins like boiling water.

When the point of the Sırnayza tore through the first ring, that steel — the steel that Bölökbay had tempered, pumping the bellows with his lame foot — seemed to whistle with a tongue of its own. The lance fell and rose; fell and rose. Where Semetey plunged in, he opened a passage; where he opened a passage, he dealt slaughter. He toppled men, he toppled horses, he toppled standards. Those who counted afterward said seven thousand; seven thousand warriors were laid low before that single horseman like grass before the scythe. The forty-two rings of the siege were split from within and from without; Külçoro and Semetey brought their horses head to head in the middle of a lake of blood.

— The noose was all but around my neck, brother, said Külçoro. His breath was burning, his eyes were laughing. — They meant to take me alive; to lay me at the Cripple's feet and make me pay for my father's vengeance.

— The day a noose closes on your neck is the day my head lies on the ground, said Semetey. Spur your horse; ride clear of this blood.

But Beecin was not a body to be bled white by a single wound. Karı Han had his drums beaten behind the walls; the gates swung open, and tümen upon tümen poured forth. The plain seethed like an anthill stirred with a stick. Ten tümens, twenty tümens; the tongue of the counter grew weary, and still the counting found no end.

And in that narrow hour, out of the cloud of dust there came a rider whose white beard spread across his chest: Bakay had come, the father of the road, Bakay of the blessed fortune. His horse's sweat was mingled with the dawn; his eyes flashed like struck flint.

— Hold, Semetey! he thundered. He hauled on his reins and barred the young man's way. — Hold, I say! Beecin is not entered by the sword; how many times has it been tried? Your father Manas entered; his blood stayed there, and his life barely reached Talas. Almambet entered; his head was severed here. Çubak entered; his bones remained in this soil. Sırgak entered; no man ever saw him return. I am the last old man to come alive out of that campaign; give ear to my word. Beecin is a well, and it has no bottom; pour an army

into it and it does not overflow. Turn back, son. A true warrior knows also the day of his turning.

Semetey's hand tightened on the shaft of the Sırnayza, and loosened, and tightened again. Ahead, the tümens were forming their ranks; behind, in Bakay's eyes, stood the shadow of four graves. A voice within the young man said, go; take your father's vengeance today. Another voice, from deeper still, a voice like his mother's voice, said only: Talas. Talas.

Semetey turned his reins. He turned them, but the vein in his neck had swollen with fury like a cord.

The warriors set their horses' heads toward the setting sun. Three days and three nights they pounded the road; three days and three nights the dust never left their backs. On the fourth day they came to the broad spine of Calpak-Kıya, and from there to the sheer cliffs of Car-Taş; they loosened their horses' girths and drew breath for the first time. They took dried meat from their saddlebags and poured kımız from their skins; but nothing went down any man's throat entire. Bakay sat by the fire hugging his knees, watching the tongue of the flame.

— The trail will find us, he said. The Cripple is like a dog that has let an easy morsel slip from its jaws; he will not leave our track.

The old man was not mistaken. That night the watch was divided in two; the horses were bedded down saddled, the fires were banked to ash. And as the horizon paled toward dawn, the flat ground before Car-Taş went dark; Konurbay had come with a hundred thousand horsemen and spread his army at the foot of the slope. He himself rode forward; that black tulpar he called Algara pounded the earth beneath him, scattering foam from its mouth. Konurbay's voice came echoing and re-echoing off the cliffs:

— Hey, Burut! Do not think you have saved yourself by running! If there is a man among you, let him come to the field; let us meet man to man. Let the one defeated on the field of champions take his army and withdraw. But if you have no man among you, I will slaughter your herds and scatter your ashes to the sky!

Külçoro shot from his place like an arrow and seized Semetey's stirrup:

— Brother, send me! Let me go; the vengeance of my father Almambet is a debt hung upon my own neck. You are the pillar of the line; if harm comes to you, Talas is orphaned. I beg you, send me!

Semetey bent down and took his companion's head between his two palms; he kissed his brow.

— Your day too will come, my shadow, he said. Today is my day. Konurbay's lance has tasted my father's flesh; this flesh knows that lance. Stand out of my way.

He drew the Akolpok over his back; that white armored kaftan which Kanıkey had stitched without heed of night or day, working a prayer into every loop and steel into every layer, rippled upon him like water. He took up the Sırnayza and rode his horse into the field. The two armies ranged themselves on the two slopes; between them lay an empty flat, like the field of death.

Konurbay moved first; such was the custom — the first blow belonged to the challenger. He drove Algara forward in a lather of foam, leveled his bronze lance at shoulder height, and with all his weight, with all his horse's speed, struck it against Semetey's chest. The blow was like a flood crashing against a mountain; Semetey stood rigid, the horse staggered back, and the rocks spun the echo four ways around. And the bronze lance, at the point where it touched the golden collar of the Akolpok, cracked with a splintering roar; it broke in three, and only the haft remained in Konurbay's hand. The Cripple stared at his own broken lance; and in his gaze, for the first time, there was something other than fury.

— A mother's due, Kanıkey had said once; let every thrust of my needle be a shield. And so it had become.

— My turn, Cripple! said Semetey. His voice was low; and a low voice is more terrible than a high war-cry.

He spurred his horse. The Sırnayza came down. Konurbay raised his shield for cover; the shield split. His armor took the blow; the armor caved. The point of the steel crunched through two black ribs in the Cripple's left side. Konurbay bent over his saddle like a drawn bow; blood came from his mouth, and the world went dark before his eyes and came light again. Death showed him its face so closely that he felt its cold breath upon his cheek. But Algara understood the last spasm in its master's knee; with that winged gallop of his he wheeled and flew from the field like a bird. Semetey gave chase; gave chase, but no horse could overtake Algara — since Akkula, none had ever been seen to match him.

Even in flight the Cripple was cunning. He drew the yada stone from his breast; he turned that black stone over in his palm, mumbling spellwords in his mouth, and held it up

to the sky. The sky first yellowed, then blackened, then went mad. Hail fell in midsummer; after hailstones big as fists, rain poured from the sky in ropes, the streams swelled and cut the roads, the flood came and wiped away every trace. Six days that accursed doom lasted; for six days neither sky was seen nor earth. When the clouds parted on the seventh day, not one hoofprint of Konurbay remained upon the plain.

Bakay wrung out his wet beard and smiled; it was a bitter smile.

— He who flees by the stone, he said, returns by blood. This matter is not ended here, my children. Not ended — newly begun.

✦ ✦ ✦

Within Beecin, in Konurbay's ordo, the candles were not put out for sixty days. Chinese physicians, remedies of every cause and cure in their hands, spread salve upon salve over the broken ribs; dressings were changed, elixirs poured, pastes pounded from mountain roots. Sixty days the Cripple lay on his back; he stared at the ceiling, and on the ceiling he saw always the same thing: a white kaftan with a golden collar, and his own lance breaking in three. By night Manas entered his dreams; astride Akkula, as in the old days. When he woke and sat up, his ribs ached, and through the ache there ran always the same thought: the father is dead, the son remains; the tree is felled, the root remains. Until the root was torn out and withered, this matter would not end. Shame is like a wound; the wound closes, the shame does not. And shame that does not close turns to hatred.

On the morning of the sixtieth day Konurbay rose to his feet; and no sooner risen than he summoned his council. His face was sallow, his eyes sunk in their hollows; but his voice was like the hammer falling on the iron anvil.

— Look at me, he said. Shall this China, which has marched before my horse since I was six years old, be made a laughingstock by the lance of a Burut boy? Hear me: over the Manchu I have set Ezkara. Let Tagılık take command of the Kalmuk. Let Şıykıçu drive the Soloon, let Akayar muster the Şibe, and let Karagul son of Kataal be chieftain of the Tirgoot. Beat the drums, plant the standards, turn the road toward Talas. This time I will wither not the boy but the root. I will turn water into the hearth of Manas; never again shall smoke rise from that hearth.

The five chieftains prostrated themselves from five sides. And China, that boundless China, began to turn like a great millstone; the tümens were mustered, the granaries emptied, cook-houses raised along the roads. The horsemen, the foot-soldiers, and the wagons of the forty tribes of Kıtay flowed into a single river, and that river marched toward the setting sun, toward Talas.

In Talas, in those days, there was not one cloud in the sky. The joy of the return from Beecin had run long; kımız was milked and drunk, the days passed in horse-races, the nights in feasting with the girls and in song. Fires burned before the grey yurts, the herds fattened loose upon the steppe, the young men wrestled. The Kirghiz took a single combat won for a world conquered. Disaster comes to a sleeping homeland always thus: silent, patient, and sure of step.

Only one pair of eyes did not sleep. Bakay went out by night to watch the stars, and by morning he watched the roads through the passes. In the dust the wind carried he sensed a heaviness, in the flight of the birds a skittishness. He was master of seventy tongues; but the tongue he knew best was the tongue of omens. One night he dreamed that a black cloud swallowed the Ala-Too; the moment he woke he rose, and in the first red of dawn he saddled his horse. He woke no one; only, passing before Kanıkey's white palace, he halted his horse's head for a moment, then rode on. His road was long: he was going to the land of the Eşteks, to the ordo of Camgırçı. He was going to ask for help, to clasp hands, to put the friendship of the black day to the proof.

✦ ✦ ✦

Camgırçı was a khan arrived at his eighty-first year; his hair, his beard, his very lashes had gone white, but his gaze was still the gaze of a young eagle. He met Bakay before his pavilion, and the two old men embraced three times.

— Blessed be your white beard, Bakay, he said. You are not a man to spill horse-sweat for nothing. Speak: has the wolf come down, or has the flood come?

— Both at once, Camgırçı, said Bakay. The wolf is Konurbay, the flood is all of China. They are coming upon Talas. Were Manas alive I would not have come to you; Manas's son is young, and his homeland unwary. The blood of Eştek and Kirghiz has boiled in one cauldron since days of old. Give your hand, give horses, give men.

Camgırçı stroked his white beard once; then he rose to his feet, and his rising shook off all eighty-one of his years.

— Beat the drums! he thundered. Let every soul in the land of the Eştek who owns a hearth hear it: whoever raises his hand against the hearth of Manas has raised it against mine!

The drums were beaten, word was sent to the mountains; fires were lit from pass to pass, and the tidings went from camp to camp. Camgırçı's son Şayımbet, a young brave whose mustache had barely begun to darken, knelt before his father and girded on the sword. Horsemen came down from the summer pastures, provisions were gathered from the camps; in three days the army was mustered, and on the fifth day it took the road.

In those days Sarı Han, who kept watch toward Talas, had already seen the dust on the horizon and turned his horse's head. He rode without heed of night or day; his horse in foam, himself in dust, he reached Talas and plunged straight into Kanıkey's white palace, into the midst of the council of counsel.

— Konurbay is coming! he said. His breath cut his words to pieces. — He has mustered the forty tribes of Kıtay, appointed five chieftains; before him a flood, behind him smoke. Three days' march away — four at the most!

The council roared like a boiling cauldron; some said weapons, some said the passes, some said an envoy of peace. In the midst of the roar the word came round to mother Kanıkey, seated in the place of honor, who had never once let the black kerchief of mourning slip from her shoulder. Kanıkey rose slowly; when she rose the council fell silent, and in the silence the crackle of the hearth was heard.

— Hear me, she said. Her voice was grave, her eyes were dry; her tears had long since learned to flow inward. — I know Konurbay better than you. When he was yet a boy of six he grew like a wolf-cub in his father's ordo; at ten he was whipping the men who raced the horses; at twenty he made all China tremble. Have you forgotten the campaign of Beecin? I have not forgotten. My khan Manas came back from that campaign with his breast pierced through; forty days I tended him, forty nights I bound and swaddled his wounds — I could not hold him, he went. Almambet went, Çubak went, Sırgak went; of the forty companions there remained the white-bearded Bakay, and we who weep at the hearthside. If since that day I have worked steel into every seam I stitched, if I have kept my son's back strong against this day — then this day has come. Set down the kımız bowl. Take up the sword.

She was silent a moment; then she lowered her voice, and that lowered voice weighed more than every voice raised in the council:

— One thing more I will say; do not forget it: Konurbay does not come by the sword alone. Where he is beaten, he clutches at sorcery; at the stone, at the incense, at the black words. Meet the sword with the sword, and the trick with the mind. Do not stray from Bakay's word.

Every man who left the council girded on his sword. As Çıyırdı the mother and Kanıkey stood side by side, two mothers seeing the army off, their tears ran together; the one was sending forth her son's son, the other her son. The whole homeland prayed, from its white-bearded elders to the babe in the cradle; the prayers circled above the standards like birds.

Before the setting-out, Kanıkey called her son to the front of the white palace. From the very bottom of the chest she drew out the Akolpok; the sleep of how many nights, the point of how many needles, the warmth of how many prayers had sunk into that white kaftan. With her own hands she drew it over Semetey's back; over it she fastened the çarayna, that bright breastplate, and cinched its buckles herself. Then the lame master Bölökbay limped forward; in his arms, wrapped in felt, were the Sırnayza he had tempered at his own forge, and the moon-mouthed axe.

— The temper of this lance was given three winters from the ice of the Ala-Too, said Bölökbay. Let your hand not tremble, son; iron knows the hand that holds it.

— What is on your back is your mother; what is in your hand is your homeland, said Kanıkey. Go now. Go like your father; but do not return like your father — return alive.

Semetey pressed his mother's hand to his brow; he mounted his horse. The armies flowed into the passes before Talas.

They had moved in time; for on the evening of the following day, the horizon darkened from one end to the other. First came the dust, then the rumbling, then the thing itself: the forty tribes of Kıtay spread out before Talas beneath Konurbay's standard. This was no army; it was a river burst its banks, a black flood seeking its bed. The fires they lit on the night of their encampment vied in number with the stars of the sky; no one could tell which were the more. When morning came they formed rank upon rank: one end at the mountain's foot, the other end lost beyond seeing. Tümen after tümen, Ezkara drove the Manchu, Tagılık marshaled the Kalmuk, Şıykıçu led the Soloon and Akayar the Şibe; and at

the very front, at the head of the Tırgoot, Karagul son of Kataal let his crimson standard stream.

And the flood was loosed.

On the first day, earth and sky touched. Arrows fell thicker than rain; lances bent and straightened like a reed-bed. The earth groaned under the booming of the drums; wounded horses, masterless, ears pricked, ran mad between the two ranks. Kirghiz and Eştek stood like a bow drawn before the homeland; the bow flexed and flexed and did not break. Camgırçı plunged in from the right wing; he had left the weight of his eighty-one years upon the saddle and fought with the ghost of his youth. Once, men said, in some campaign, Camgırçı had held a pass alone for three days; now his arm was not the old arm, his sword rested after every second blow, but his eye was still the eye of that pass, and the young men behind him became men by looking into that eye. Sarı Han broke through from the left wing; in the center Bakay went in and out, his white beard running crimson with blood. Kançoro from one side, Külçoro from the other, the two young men like two poplars, plunged again and again into the army and dealt slaughter. That day three khans' sons saw an enemy's face for the first time: Baytaylak, Kalık, and Camgırçı's tender son Şayımbet loosed their first arrows, saw their first blood, and when evening came there was nothing left of childhood in any of their three faces.

At evening the two armies drew back and counted their wounds. Talas had not fallen; but neither, it seemed, had Kıtay grown less. Behind every rank cut down came a new one; the sea was not to be emptied with a pail. That night behind the earthworks the wounded were bound up, new hafts were fitted to broken lances; the women set the cauldrons boiling, the old men whittled arrows. No one spoke of defeat; but no one could speak of victory either, and that silence hung between the two words like a heavy stone.

The next morning, as the sun rose, a single horseman appeared in the emptiness between the two armies. It was Karagul son of Kataal on the Toru Aygır; prancing his horse, now rearing it, now wheeling, he came to the middle of the field. His armor blazed in the sun like fish-scale. He spun the lance in his hand in the air, and his voice traveled both armies at once:

— Come, Burut! Come, I said! If there is one among you born a man of his mother, let him come forth; let us meet man to man! Or are the warriors of the Kirghiz all sheep, that we should shear the lot of you together?

Three times he wheeled, three times he cried it. The ranks of Kıtay laughed thunderously and beat their shields. Single combat between two armies was an ancient custom; to leave the matter to the wrists of two men rather than turn blood into a lake was a way laid down by the forefathers, and whoever trampled that way was held black-faced in both worlds. A silence fell over the Kirghiz ranks; and in that silence the eyes of the whole homeland turned, as they must, to a single man: to Bakay, who knew seventy tongues, who had seen the councils of seven khans, the blessed legacy left by Manas. The word was first his; the word was always first his.

✦ ✦ ✦

Bakay rode his horse slowly along the front of the ranks. He did not hurry; old age too has a weapon of its own, and its name is patience. He halted at the edge of the field, looked Karagul over from crown to heel, and laughed. He laughed aloud, that all might hear.

— Is it you who throws down the challenge? he said. Why, Karagul, son of Kataal! I am Bakay — the one who cut off the road when your Khan searched for a road of escape inside Beecin. I am Bakay who stood at Manas's right hand in the campaign where men fought six months without pause, day and night. I have seen Esenkan's council, I have spoken in Alööke's ordo; I know your tongue, and I know your lineage too. And in those campaigns, who were you? You were a slave not fit to hold a horse; while your betters kissed the stirrup, you shoveled dung in the stable. Now you have climbed onto the Toru Aygır, and the field of champions sits handsomely in your mouth! Go now, tell your khan: the warriors of the Kirghiz are not sheep; but neither do they send the wolf out against a slave. We shall send you someone of your own measure; and even he will be too much for you — but no matter.

The laughter in the Kıtay ranks was cut short; from the Kirghiz ranks rose a roar, a roar smelling of kımız, angry and joyful at once. Karagul's face went as crimson as his standard; a frothing curse burst from his mouth, but Bakay had long since turned his back.

Semetey called his companions to his side. Külçoro and Kançoro came; the one a cub left in the womb by Almambet, the other a branch broken from the blood of Çubak. Semetey wound an arm around the neck of each and pressed them both to his breast.

— My twin lambs, my two shadows, he said. One of you is my right eye, one my left. Today the field belongs to Kançoro. Go, Kançoro; cross lances with Karagul. If your hour suffices, die; a warrior's death is the brave man's last homeland — be not ashamed. If your strength suffices, tear out that slave's ribs as I broke the ribs of the Cripple. Speak your father's name, call upon your forefather's spirit; the rest your wrist will know.

Kançoro struck his knee to the earth and kissed the hem of Semetey's garment. Külçoro, with all the warmth of his brotherhood, tightened his girth with his own hand and set the lance in his grip; their eyes met, and no word was needed. Kançoro leapt to his horse and rode into the field. And the instant he entered that field, in the opposing ranks one man's heart leapt to his mouth: Ezkara, khan of the Manchu, fixed his eyes on the youth and could not believe what he saw. That brow, those knitted eyebrows, that set of the shoulders, that crooked seat upon the horse... Çubak. Çubak, who had mown down their armies before Beecin, whose name had entered Manchu cradles as the terror in the lullaby. Ezkara leaned toward the chieftain beside him; his voice was hoarse:

— Look at that boy. Were I to say Çubak has risen from the dead, it would be no lie. The living image of the man whose very corpse we feared has come onto the field. No good will come of the end of this war; the dead are returning in their offspring.

On the field two horses were loosed at each other from the two ends. Karagul's lance leveled, Kançoro's lance leveled; the dust split in two along the way. At the first shock the two lances rang against two shields, and both men kept the saddle. They wheeled and were loosed again. This time Kançoro lay flat along his horse's neck, let Karagul's point spend itself on air, and slid his own point past the rim of the other's shield to touch his shoulder; Karagul was shaken, and barely gathered himself.

And in that moment, Kıtay trampled the custom.

A horn blared; and at its blaring the Tırgoot ranks boiled like ants, and soldiers poured onto the field tümen upon tümen. In the blink of an eye Kançoro, who stood there for single combat, was surrounded; arrows began to fall like rain, like hail, like flood. A howl of fury broke from the Kirghiz ranks: they had spat upon the custom, they had trodden the honor of the champions' field underfoot.

— For the breaker of custom there is no custom! thundered Semetey. — To my companion — ride!

Külçoro plunged in like a thunderbolt, after him Sarı Han, after him a company of braves. But before they could reach him, a roar rose from the heart of the encirclement: Kançoro, under the raining arrows, had driven his horse straight at Karagul, slung his shield across his back, and gripped his lance at the butt. Karagul wheeled one last time, swung one last time; swung at air. Kançoro's lance ran through the chest of the Tırgoot chieftain, armor and all. Karagul son of Kataal slid from the Toru Aygır's mane and toppled at the feet of his own army; and where he fell, the dust raised by his own men covered him.

The encirclement wavered for a moment, a single moment; that moment sufficed. Külçoro tore through, caught Kançoro under his arm, and they fought their way out, wheeling and striking. The arrows came after them, and missed; the arrow of the custom-breaker flies bewildered too.

Konurbay saw it from the height. He saw Karagul topple; he saw the crimson standard of the Tırgoot fall to earth, saw his own men trample that standard as they fled — and in the place of his broken ribs the old pain kindled like a new fire. He rose upright upon Algara; his voice overrode the horns and the drums:

— Wither the Burut root and branch! From this day forth, no single combat, no custom, no quarter! Shield to shield, breast to breast! Whoever turns back, his neck is a gift to my sword!

And the forty tribes of Kıtay were loosed all together. The rest of that day was hard to tell even afterward, even in the mouths of the manasçıs: the sky went black with the cloud of arrows; the Talas water drank blood at its banks. Camgırçı held the right wing, never letting his son Şayımbet from his side; Sarı Han's company was scattered three times, three times it re-formed. Semetey, the Sırnayza in his hand, rode to wherever the line bent deepest and straightened it; the white of the Akolpok ran crimson by evening. Kirghiz and Eştek, yielding and standing, standing and yielding, held their ground before the homeland; the front of every grey yurt became a rampart, the mallet in every woman's hand a weapon.

Toward late afternoon a horseman rode out before the Kirghiz ranks; no one had bidden him ride out. It was Külçoro on his grey horse; he had pushed his cap back from his brow and was laughing, radiant. That a young man should laugh so, in a place where death lay so thick, silenced both armies for a moment. Külçoro rode his horse up before the white-bearded elders and bowed from the saddle:

— Fathers! White-bearded ones! I ask your blessing. My father Almambet went to Beecin while I was yet in the womb; I never saw his face — his vengeance I may yet see. I swear an oath to fight Konurbay: either his head, or mine. Give me your blessing, open my road!

The white-bearded ones opened their hands; Bakay stepped forward and laid his palm on the young man's brow:

— Go, my foal. May Almambet's spirit be at your right shoulder, and Manas's spirit at your left. May Kıdır be your companion; may the çiltens walk before you.

Külçoro rode his horse toward the field; going, he turned once and looked at Semetey, and in that look there was neither fear nor farewell; only the brightness of a spark struck on a dark day. And on the opposite slope Konurbay, seeing that grey-horsed rider, turned to stone upon Algara. That bearing, that shoulder, that slight tilt of the head to one side... the oldest, deepest wound of his heart opened its mouth. He turned to his own ranks, and his voice cracked as he shouted:

— Do you see that rider on the grey? That one is my true enemy! That is the son of Almambet — the seed of the one man in this world who ever made me afraid! Bring him to me alive; bind him living — whoever kills him, I will kill! Destroy the white-bearded Bakay; while that old man lives, the Burut's back will not be broken! And if any man flees, turn back and put him to the sword first!

All the horns blared at once. Ezkara drove the Manchu, Tagılık the Kalmuk, Şıykıçu the Soloon, Akayar the Şibe; the forty tribes of Kıtay, like a single body, marched with all their weight upon Talas. The sun sank behind the mountains like a bleeding wound; darkness came down between the two armies, but the roar did not cease.

That night Bakay looked up from behind the earthworks at a starless sky; there was not one star in the heavens, and in the wind from the north there was a cold that did not belong to midsummer. The wind smelled of ice; of ice and of something else, something black and unnamed. The old man drew his felt over his shoulder and murmured a prayer within himself. He remembered Konurbay's yada stone; that black stone that had rained hail for six days. He thought that winter had not yet come, but that there were those who could take winter by the hand and lead it here; and the dam above the Talas water, that old, weary dam, would not, for some reason, leave his mind.

— Let us get through tomorrow, he said to himself; let us get through tomorrow — and whether our strength will suffice for the rest, Kıdır knows.

In the darkness, the fires of the forty tribes of Kıtay filled the emptiness of the stars; and at the head of the greatest of those fires sat Konurbay, listening to his broken ribs, turning the yada stone over and over in his palm, smiling.

CHAPTER 26

The Witch's Winter and the Broken Dam

— ❖ —

Behind the stone walls of Beecin, in the gold-pillared ordo of his forefather Aziz Han, when Konurbay rose to his feet, the forty kalday khans forgot the kımız bowls before them and held their breath. The Cripple's eyes were like iron heated in the coals; his voice shook the felts of the hall like a mountain torrent pounding down over the rocks.

— Shall the blood of my father Alöökö lie unavenged upon the ground? he thundered. That bloodied bull they call Manas put out my father's hearth, scattered my people, drove off my herds. Manas is dead; but from his seed Semetey has sprung, and from Almambet's loins Külçoro has sprung. Until that seed is scorched, Hıtay's sleep is no sleep, and its bread no bread. I will burn Talas, I will make ash of Keñ-Kol; I will clap Semetey in irons and drag Külçoro by a leash to Çon-Beecin. Who is with me?

The kalday khans looked at one another. One of the older among them tugged at his beard and made to murmur: where the name of Manas is spoken, the bones of Hıtay ache,

he said; then Konurbay's gaze swung upon him, and he swallowed his words and bent over his bowl. The Cripple drew his sword and held it to the embers of the hearth in their midst; the iron reddened.

— As this iron has reddened, he said, so has my heart. The only water that will quench it is the blood of Talas.

Hıtay rose, the Manchu rose, the Kalmuk rose. The Tırgoot rose, the Solon rose; forty couriers rode out of forty gates, carrying the decree to forty lands. Drums were beaten, standards planted, and the dust of the army seething along the roads curtained the sun. So vast was that multitude that when its vanguard camped at the waterhead, its rearguard had not yet passed out of the gates of Beecin; where it passed, the springs ran dry and the grass was scoured to the root. Three days and three nights they marched, and three days and three nights more; on the seventh morning the green bosom of Talas and Keñ-Kol darkened like a grainfield under a swarm of locusts. Konurbay stretched out his whip from Algara's back:

— Plunder! Let no camp remain and no herd, no cradle remain and no cauldron!

That day, for the first time, the steppe felt winter's cold in its heart in the middle of summer. Smoke rose from the camps along the banks of Keñ-Kol; the herdsmen drove the horse-herds into the mountains, and messengers flew at full gallop to Talas.

When the first whirlwind of the battle broke, Kançoro son of Çubak had hurled himself forward without reckoning the road back. He was young, his blood ran wild; he wanted to win his father Çubak's name in a single day, with a single blow. He scattered the vanguard, toppled a banner; but behind the banner opened a sea. Six thousand pikes of Hıtay swung toward him; his horse's mane was soaked in blood, his shield was split, and all four sides of him became a forest of iron. One lasso grazed his shoulder; a second wound around his horse's neck and snapped. In that moment Kançoro felt for the first time the cold finger of death on the nape of his neck; before his eyes passed the willows of Talas and his mother's hearth. Captivity was descending on his neck like a noose — when a thunderclap split the sky in two.

Külçoro son of Almambet was coming. On his shoulder was Almabaş, the enchanted musket his father had left him. That musket was the one legacy Almambet had carried out of Beecin; for years it had lain sulking at the bottom of a chest, its flintlock broken, its spring gone slack. Master Bölökbay had annealed it at his forge for three days and three nights, welded its fracture, drawn its spring taut; and mother Kanıkey had wiped and oiled

its barrel with her own hand, swaddled its stock in white felt as one swaddles a bride, and sent it off to Külçoro with the words, "May your father's eye be at your back." Külçoro took the reins in his teeth, leveled Almabaş, and fired once. Before the smoke of that single shot had scattered, sixty lords of Hıtay, Tagılık at their head, toppled from their saddles like reeds cut down. The iron forest shuddered for a moment; through that gap Külçoro plunged; he snatched the reins of Kançoro's horse and pulled his comrade out of the opened jaws of death.

At the far end of the field, Ezkara, khan of the Manchu, and Konurbay ground their teeth.

— Those two cubs, said Ezkara, are to be taken alive. Bind them, drag them to the dungeon of Çon-Beecin; only so will Tagılık's blood grow cold.

But the order was easy, the deed hard. The two companions rode side by side, leaving behind them headless bodies and masterless horses.

When word of the siege reached Talas, Semetey was already on his feet. Old Bakay stroked his white beard and took up his shield; the scabbard of his sword had not been opened in years, and when it opened, it was as if the scent of the age of Manas rose out of it.

— If the Cripple has come, he said, the old ledger has been opened. I am of that ledger's first page.

Sarı Han, khan of the Argın, raised his standard and mustered his tribe in a single day. Camgırçı, bey of the Eştek, drew his army up at the foot of a hill and had sacks full of wheat opened before them; he dealt each man a handful, and the men swallowed the grains and swore their oath: may the face of him who turns his back on the soil that gave this bread be blackened; may the bread itself weep after him who flees. Ten thousand throats swore as one mouth; the roar of that oath wandered the valley until evening. The Kirghiz-Argın flood poured onto the plain like snowmelt loosed from the mountain.

Under Semetey was Taybuurul; and the story of that tulpar was as mighty as the beast itself. Once, long ago, Manas had met on the field with Saykal — a girl, yet fiercer in combat than any man; neither could he unhorse her nor she him. Their lance-duels lasted not a day, not a month — ten full months they lasted; at the end of the ten months Saykal's lance broke, and she owned her defeat, and gave as forfeit that noble mare. From that mare, kin by blood to Algara and Kılkara, Taybuurul was born. Kanıkey raised him in the hidden horse-herds through the Buhara years; she fed him by night with her own hand lest anyone

see, covered his back in winter with her own shawl, measured his chest with a cord while he was still a colt and wept, saying, "The day will come when you are my orphan's wing." For years and years the woman kept the secret; when they asked after the horse, she said, I sold him; she said, he died — she lied, and guarded the trust. Now that wing was spread: when the hoofbeats of Buurul were heard, the horses of Hıtay shied and backed away, and when Buurul neighed, the shudder that ran through the enemy ranks could be seen with the eye.

Semetey drove forward, cleaving the very center of the army. Wherever Zulpukor fell, the rank opened; wherever Buurul leapt, the opened rank could not close again. On the right wing Külçoro and Kançoro, on the left wing Bakay; at the flanks Sarı Han and Camgırçı dealt slaughter. Fourteen days and fourteen nights they grappled; fourteen days and fourteen nights the grass of the steppe drank blood, and the wolf and the bird ate their fill. By night the fires of the two armies burned facing each other like two starry skies, and when morning came, half the stars had gone out. The field filled with headless bodies and masterless horses; the beasts with empty saddles wandered between the ranks, neighing and neighing, as if searching for their masters.

On one of those fourteen days Kançoro was caught once more. This time Hıtay drew him in by design: they feigned that their front was breaking and closed the rear, and the young companion was left in the middle of the ring. Lasso upon lasso rained down; his horse sank onto its two knees. And again, as on the first day, the sea of iron was split by Külçoro's war-cries; Almabaş spoke once more, the arms that cast the lassoes fell one by one, and Külçoro, seizing hold behind his brother's saddle, tore him for the second time from the mouth of death. As they rode back there was neither reproach on his face nor boasting; only, drenched in blood and sweat, he smiled:

— Death loves you dearly, my brother; I have come to love you more.

Ezkara, meanwhile, was in mourning within his own ranks. Before the corpses of Tagılık, of Karagul, of the sixty lords felled by a single shot, he raised his lament; he tore his white hair and beat his breast:

— You were the salt of my sixty feasts, the pillars of my sixty realms; an orphan's musket took you all in a single breath. With what face shall I return to Beecin?

Yet that same Ezkara, watching from the height as Semetey wheeled right and left upon Buurul like a tongue of flame, felt his heart wrung in spite of himself.

— Could any man who sees that stature, that majesty, bear to destroy it? he murmured. Would that he were not the enemy's seed, but my own son.

On the evening of the fourteenth day both armies drew back to catch their breath; the field, with its harvest of the dead between them, lay silent in the middle. As dusk fell, the two companions dismounted on a hilltop and clasped their bloodstained hands together. Külçoro said:

— Once I pulled you out of the midst of six thousand, my brother; I will pull you out a second time too. Be my back, and I will be yours; whoever turns from this oath, may his face be black before the spirit of Manas.

Kançoro swore; he counted out the debt of his twice-rescued life, and renewed the oath of brotherhood. But as he swore, deep in his eyes a shadow stirred which neither Külçoro nor any other saw that evening; only years later, when the deed was past undoing, would everyone see it.

Konurbay, in his pavilion, brought his fist down upon his knee:

— If I return to Beecin without tearing Talas out by the root, may the grave of Alöökö be forbidden me!

And he drove Algara onto the field.

✦ ✦ ✦

The next day it was as if a mountain walked out of the ranks of Hıtay: Kaman the alp, Konurbay's giant champion, a heap of flesh whose bulk wearied the two horses that bore it, came straight at Semetey. His lance was like the trunk of a pine; when he swung it the air moaned, and where his shadow fell, the ground darkened.

— Which one is the whelp of Manas? he bellowed. My cauldron is boiling in Beecin — let me come back before your flesh grows cold!

With his first stroke he cracked Semetey's shield; the second Buurul made fall on air, springing aside. For a third there was no time: Külçoro struck from the flank like a thunderbolt, set his lance into the hollow of the giant's armpit and threw his whole body behind it, tearing Kaman from his saddle and hurling him to the ground. The earth shook; before the dust had settled Semetey was there, Zulpukor traced its arc, and the head of Kaman the alp parted from its body and rolled in the dust. After him plunged Coon the

alp, roaring, a vulture's tail fixed to his helm, believing himself deathless; his end came by the same sword, in the same doom. The two giant heads lay side by side in the middle of the field, like two black cauldrons.

Before the corpses of his three champions — Kaman, Coon, and Karagul who had fallen before — Konurbay tore his hair.

— I will leave no man alive among the Kirghiz, he said. I will cut them down to the boy in the cradle, to the girl on the hip!

But when the sword failed, they turned to sorcery. Ezkara went to the pavilion of the Tirgoot khan; there sat Orongu, the woman warrior who dressed in a man's garb, girded a sword at her waist, and whose eyes burned like two coals. From her breast Orongu drew out the yada stone, coal-black, the size of a dried heart; she dipped the witch-stone in water, chanted over it, breathed on it, held it to the sky; she loosed her hair to the wind, and old words that no one knew turned on her tongue. It was the middle of summer; suddenly black clouds boiled over the Ala-Too, midday turned to night, and the north wind bit into the marrow. Eight days and eight nights the hail fell; stones big as fists pierced the warrior's helm, broke the horse's back, buried the meadow in mud. Then the floods were loosed; the streams ran rabid, the horse-herds of the Kirghiz were destroyed herd upon herd, the screams of drowning colts mingled with the nights, tents were torn away, and the army in its summer clothing froze fast in the claws of the witch's winter. The men huddled together and pressed close to the warmth of their horses; in the mornings the sentries were found frozen on their feet. Bakay looked at the sky and shook his head:

— This cloud is no cloud of God, he said; a witch's hand is in it. One does not cross swords with witchcraft; a brave man needs a mountain at his back. Withdraw to Talas.

Helpless, they withdrew to Talas; behind them they left a plain licked by flood, beaten by hail, and strewn with the dead.

Konurbay did not let the chance slip. First he wrapped Talas in a ring twelve deep; it did not suffice, and he raised it to forty-two. Then he sent an envoy; and on the envoy's tongue was an ultimatum more bitter than poison:

— The Cripple says: surrender Talas. Pay in tribute a thousand girls and a thousand thoroughbreds. And beyond that, send me old Bakay and Külçoro as stable-slaves. If you will not, I shall leave no stone upon stone, no head upon shoulders.

The ordo shook with an uproar. A thousand girls — the mothers beat their breasts. A thousand thoroughbreds — the herdsmen spat on the ground. But heaviest of all was the final word: Bakay a slave, Külçoro a groom! Those who could not make Manas bow his head in his lifetime now wished to tie his confidant to a stable door. Bakay — Manas's lifelong confidant, the old man with a saint's breath — laughed as the envoy's words ended; and that laugh was worse than the drawing of a sword. Then he rose slowly. He consulted no one; he had Kökçolok brought, his tulpar of sixty years, girded on Kılbolot, and took up besides a lance that no one knew of, forged of secret steel and quenched in human tears.

— The vengeance of Manas was a trust laid on my neck, he said. My account with the Cripple is an old one.

Semetey and Külçoro pleaded with him: you are our white-bearded elder, father; let us take the field, they said. Bakay would not listen.

— When Manas lay dying, this vengeance was entrusted to me, he said. Treachery to a trust is treachery to the faith. And besides, let the Cripple see: if the old men of the Kirghiz are such as this, what must their young men be?

On the field of Taş-Kaşat two horsemen faced each other: the one on black-maned Algara, in the strength of his life, his armor playing in the sunlight like fish-scale — Konurbay; the other with his whitened beard falling to his chest, mounted past sixty on a horse of sixty — Bakay. The two armies stood ranged on the two slopes, watching without drawing breath. Hıtay laughed; can an old man sit a horse, they said; and the laughter died in their throats. Konurbay put Algara to the gallop and drove his lance home with all his fury and all his weight; the lance could not shift Bakay a hand's-breadth in his saddle — it was as if it had struck into a mountain. Kökçolok gave back a single step, no more. Bakay drew Kılbolot and clove the enemy's lance in three at a single stroke; then he leveled his secret lance, struck Konurbay through the chest, and stretched him from the black horse's back onto the bare earth. The kalday khans ran shrieking, dragged their khan away and bore him out of death's reach; and they were so many that in a moment Bakay was left alone in the midst of a sea of iron. That sea was split: Külçoro plunged in, breasting the blows of seven thousand pikes with his shield, with his armor, with his own flesh, and drew the white-bearded khan out of the ring.

That evening, around the Kirghiz fires, Bakay's name became a song; on the Hıtay side, Konurbay licked the blood less of his wound than of his pride.

That night the Cripple smothered the pain of defeat with a blacker reckoning. In the morning the Kirghiz saw it with horror: the Talas river was not flowing. In the bed where only a day before children had splashed and young brides had filled their pitchers, dead fish and wet pebbles lay glistening. The Cripple had had the water turned aside upstream, and a giant dam built in the gorge of Burgan-Suu. The siege rose to forty-six rings; by night the fires of Hıtay made forty-six circles around Talas, glowing red like heated iron. The wells were drawn dry, the cisterns showed their bottoms; forty-one days the people went without water. Mothers gave their babes wet felt to suckle; horses licked the earth; lips cracked, tongues stuck to the palate. The kımız was gone, the ayran was gone; the old men gathered the morning dew from the leaves with their tongues. Kanıkey would not drink the water that fell to her share, but carried it to the sick children; Çıyırdı rose in the middle of the night and went down into the dry riverbed, weeping among the pebbles: My Manas, she said, have they dammed even your water?

On the forty-first day a kurultay gathered at Kan-Soruñ. Sarı Han spoke first, and after him Camgırçı; the faces of both were the color of earth.

— Khan Semetey, said Sarı Han, he who dies by the sword dies once; he who dies of thirst dies every day. Let us give girls, let us give herds, let us bow the head; let the lineage at least be saved.

Before the words were done, Bakay sprang to his feet; the voice that came out of that old body was the roar of a young lion:

— What did you say? At the hearth of Manas, was it this you said? Let one of you die — let a thousand of you die — fight forty years rather than bow the neck! If the daughters of the Kirghiz are to be tribute, and the khan of the Kirghiz a slave, then let the sun not rise on that day! He who dies of thirst is a martyr; he who kneels is black-faced in both worlds.

The kurultay swallowed its tongue. Sarı Han bowed his head; his heart bled, not from his seventy wounds, but from the words he had spoken. Camgırçı remembered the oath of the wheat and looked at the ground. Semetey rose and kissed Bakay's hand:

— May your white beard be our white road, father. We will fight. If we must die of thirst, we will die like men; but a Kirghiz on his knees — the earth will not carry him nor the sky forgive him.

Kanıkey did not sleep that night. She drew from the chests the arrow-proof kaftans she had kept since the Buhara years, stitched with forty plies of silk thread; those kaftans into

whose every seam a prayer had passed and into every knot a tear, she put on the army with her own hands. As she dressed them she patted every man's shoulder and looked on each as on her own son; for she knew: how many of those kaftans would come back empty by evening, God alone knew. As Semetey with his two companions rode out against Konurbay, Çıyırdı, bent double, opened her hands to the sky; Kanıkey, in her grave stillness, kissed her son's stirrup; and the whole people, with prayers and weeping, stood gazing after the horsemen vanishing into the dust.

✦ ✦ ✦

In those days a courier named Akayar had taken Konurbay's letter and set out on the road to Beecin; he burst six horses on the way and reached Esenkan's gate on the seventh. In the letter the Cripple wrote: I have ringed Talas and dammed its water; give me one more army, and I will dig out the root. When Esenkan had read the letter he summoned his diviner; the diviner poured out his sand, and as he read the sand his hand trembled and the color fled his face:

— My khan, he said, that child came from his mother's womb with a clot of black blood in his fist. Against Semetey, who was born clutching black blood, no sword will bite and no army stand. Do not go on this campaign; and whomever you send, send him knowing he will not return.

Esenkan knitted his brows:

— The omen is one thing, the decree another. Shall the glory of Hıtay be toppled by an orphan?

And he sent a new army under the command of Çandayak, churning mountain and stone, upon Talas. The diviner gazed after it and shook his head from side to side; who goes, goes, and who returns, returns not, he said within himself — but he never opened his mouth again.

The fresh enemy stormed for seven days and seven nights. The foot of the walls filled with dead, and over the dead the living climbed anew. Sarı Han held a breach alone; by the end of the seventh day he bore seventy wounds, and his armor hung on him like a felt riddled with holes. Amcan, the champion of the Eştek, was brought down from his horse

with sixty wounds; even where he fell he did not let go of his sword. Thirst gnawed from within, the pike from without; Talas was being ground to powder between two millstones.

At Kan-Caylak, one evening, exhaustion settled even on Semetey's heart. He had not slept for days; the faces of the waterless children, the bandages of seventy-times-wounded Sarı Han, would not leave his eyes. He spoke by the fire, staring at his knees; his voice seemed not his own:

— The people are being destroyed. Let me give Buurul to Ezkara, and Ayçürök to Konurbay... Let me bow my head, so that those still living may live.

A dead silence fell around the fire. Bakay did not lift his head; only his hand tightened, and tightened, on the haft of his whip. The words were scarcely out when Külçoro shot up from his place like an arrow; from his eyes fell not tears but sparks:

— What did you say, my khan? You have set about digging my grave! The son of Almambet a slave, Ayçürök daughter of Akun a concubine to the Cripple — your tongue should have withered before it uttered it! Do the bones of Manas not ache in his tomb? If you would bow your head, bow it; I will meet death alone. I have one request: give me Buurul, and give me your blessing. If I do not return, mourn me seventy days; on the seventy-first day, speak my name no more — for my name will have been written not in shame, but in blood.

Semetey's eyes filled; he held out Buurul's reins and kissed his companion's brow:

— Go, my lion. May my prayer be behind you and Kıdır before you. A moment ago I died by my words; bring us back to life by your deeds.

Bakay too laid his hand on the young companion's head and recited the old prayers within himself; Kanıkey, with her own hands, dressed Almambet's son in the last kaftan, the one she had kept against that very night. No one wept; to weep after one setting out was counted an ill omen.

The night had turned pitch-black; the moon had gone into cloud, as though it too had veiled its face. Külçoro bound Buurul's hooves in felt, muffled every clinking weapon in felt, drew over his back a Hıtay garment stripped from the dead, slid like a shadow through the gaps of the forty-six rings, and crept up to the dam of Burgan-Suu. The dam was like a black giant lying in the darkness; behind it could be heard the muffled growling of the water in its chains. At the head of the dam watched Tüktaman, the guardian champion

whose body was invisible beneath its hair. Külçoro called out from the darkness; he bent his tongue to the speech of Hıtay and his voice to an oily fawning:

— I am the son of the khan of Kangür; the Cripple sent my father a letter, and I have come to inspect the dam and take the tally of the water. Open the gate, show me your fire; I am a traveler, and I am cold.

Tüktaman grunted and drew back the bolt of the gate; eager to have this khan's son kiss his hand and hem, he came close. The moment he came close, Külçoro's sword flashed once, and the giant guardian's head flew from his shoulders; the body, as if paying the vengeance of the many braves it had felled, collapsed at the foot of its own dam. The young companion wrapped himself in the guard's rank-smelling kaftan and set the cap on his own head; he passed among the watch-fires waving a greeting hand. Sixty sentries, before one could send word to another, he cut down one by one, in silence. Then he threw himself upon the lever-stones; three times he heaved, three times he drew breath, and at the third the master-beam of the dam cracked and started from its place.

Talas, chained for forty-one days, broke its chain. The water was loosed down the mountainside with a roar; first a rumbling, then a wall, then like the end of the world it came down upon the Hıtay camp sleeping in the dark. Tents, horses, banners, cauldrons — all spun in the foam in an instant. Thousands caught in their sleep were swept away without understanding what had come; and those who understood were not saved either. Hıtay, not knowing in the dark what had struck it, cried "the enemy is upon us!" and turned its swords on itself; until dawn broke, Hıtay slaughtered Hıtay. From a hilltop Külçoro, drenched to the skin, shivering, but with eyes like stars, watched the deluge he himself had loosed; then he turned Buurul's head toward Talas. When he reached the walls at daybreak the people were running to the water; lips forty-one days dry drank by the handful, mothers washed the faces of their babes, old men prostrated themselves to the water. The river ran bloody and turbid — but it ran. Semetey caught his companion in his arms and pressed him to his breast; the testament of seventy days' mourning, left behind the evening before, turned into seventy years of glory. Bakay kissed the young companion's wet brow: Blood of Almambet, he said, the water has drowned him who chained the water; today your father is laughing in his grave.

Akayar, sent to inspect the dam, was picking his way toward morning among the dead in the flooded plain when suddenly the strength went out of his knees. In the mist, upon the water, he saw horsemen: at their head a mighty figure in white armor, lion-gazed —

Manas himself; at his side Almambet, Çubak, Sırgak; behind them the forty companions, rank on rank, silent, their eyes like embers... Akayar fell flat on his horse's neck and fled back; he pitched face-down into Konurbay's pavilion:

— Mercy, my khan — Ayköl Manas is coming! An army of the dead, with his forty companions, at the head of the dam!

Konurbay flew into a fury; he scored the courier's back with his whip:

— A lie! I struck Manas down at his prayers — with this very hand I struck him! The dead do not rise; a coward takes his own shadow for an army!

But when he was left alone in his pavilion, his hand sought the hilt of his sword of its own accord; and that night the Cripple too did not sleep — could not sleep. In the dark, in the mist, a rider in white armor would not leave his eyes.

✦ ✦ ✦

When morning came, Konurbay held mourning all together for Tüktaman, for Karagul, for Tagılık, and for Orongu whom the flood had taken; then he tore off the mourning robe, cast it away, and played his last card. Before his pavilion he had the crimson standard of war raised in place of the black standard of grief; he stood before his army, and his voice carried to the farthest man:

— Whoever brings me Külçoro alive, him I will carry to Beecin and seat upon the golden throne of my forefather Aziz Han! He shall be khan, and rule as khan!

And he loosed his uncanny army: the torcu-men who spun iron ropes from their wrists, who when they cast the lasso could drag a mountain from its place; the kancarkol champions whose fists had turned to steel, on whose striking-place no grass ever grew again; the wind-footed cöökülük runners who could chase down a horse on foot; and at the very rear, everything monstrous that he had, down to the sixty-headed dragon on whose scales the sunlight sparked — all of it marched upon Talas.

The torcu-men came first; their lassoes whistled through the air like black serpents. The kancarkols walked like a wall; the shields their fists fell upon crumpled like sheet-tin. The cöökülüks streamed along the wings; they ran the fugitives down on foot and dragged them from their horses. And at the very rear, its sixty heads swaying to sixty sides, the dragon came slowly, slowly, licking the earth.

The cry of the people touched the sky. Women tore their hair, children burrowed into the felts; the wailing shook the poles of the ordo. When Semetey heard that wailing, the last hesitation within him burned to ash.

— How shall I give up my people! he said. The son of Manas knows how to die before his people.

He slung Akkelte, the legacy of Manas, over his shoulder, girded Zulpukor at his waist, and mounted Buurul. Kanıkey looked long, long into her son's face; she said no word, only bowed her head — all the prayer of that grave woman was in that bowing. With the arrow-proof kaftan of Kanıkey's stitching on his back and Bakay's blessing behind him, Semetey rode onto the field. And in that moment — visible to those given sight, invisible to those without it — at his right walked Kıdır in a white turban, and at his left and behind him rode the forty çiltens, like forty green shadows.

The lassoes of the torcu-men were severed before they touched Buurul; the steel fist of the kancarkol slid off Kanıkey's kaftan; the speed of the cöökülük could not match the arc of Zulpukor. As Semetey advanced, the uncanny army fell back; at last the Hıtay rank split, and out of it came Maadañşa, riding a bull, a single eye turning like a millstone in the middle of his forehead. The giant flung boulders like pebbles, his bull tore the earth open as a plough furrows it; his breath struck those who came near like the hot stench of carrion. Semetey's lance glanced off the giant's hide; the shot of Akkelte only staggered him. In that narrow moment old Bakay arrived; in his arms, a lance he had wrought with his own hands over the years, whose secret he had told to no one:

— Take it, my foal! he said. This lance-head was forged by moonlight and quenched with prayer; against the single eye there is but this single way.

Semetey snatched the lance and circled the giant three times on Buurul; on the third circuit, in the instant the giant raised his mace, he drove the charmed lance-head into that single eye with the strength of his whole body. Maadañşa toppled as a mountain topples, and was crushed beneath his own bull; Semetey rose in his stirrups, Zulpukor traced its last arc, and the giant's head fell to the earth, to answer for all the heads it had taken.

The shout of joy that broke from the Kirghiz ranks was cut off before it reached the sky. For the Hıtay rank was splitting once more; and this time what came made men long for what had gone. On a mule — but what a mule: its body vast as an elephant, its hoof wide as a cauldron's mouth — his sixty-fathom lance raised as if to pierce the clouds, his single eye larger than Maadañşa's and himself the stronger, came Dıñşa. He saw his

brother's headless body and did not stop, did not even bend to look; only his single eye narrowed once and opened once, and found Semetey directly. The steppe groaned at his tread, the mule's breath flattened the grass before it, and the shadow of his lance was already falling across Semetey. In the Kirghiz ranks the old men told their beads, the young men gripped their pikes; Bakay's lips were moving, but no sound came.

Semetey bent to Buurul's mane; with parched lips he whispered:

— My Creator, you are the orphan's stay. Spirit of Manas, Kıdır my father, forty çiltens — do not forsake me.

And he turned his reins, once more, toward that dark mountain that came on against him.

CHAPTER 27

The Fall of the One-Eyed Giant and the Lone Falcon

— ❖ —

Before the rim of dawn had reddened, the earth trembled. The steppe grass was still wet with dew, the horses' breath rose in plumes of steam; and while the sentries dozed beside their fires, the ground began to groan from its depths, like the skin of a great drum. First came a distant rumbling, then a cloud of dust veiled the sky; and when the dust settled, there loomed before the Kyrgyz ranks, astride a mule, a shape at whose sight the fat of the beholder's heart melted away. This was Dınşa, the one-eyed Hıtay giant brought from Kakan; the single eye in the middle of his forehead burned like an ember, and the mace he carried on his shoulder was the girth of a plane tree's trunk. Behind him a thousand champions, a thousand monstrous men, were drawn up rank upon rank, each standing like a slab of rock. Konurbay had wrenched this abomination all the way from Kakan, from the very gate of Esenhan, and loosed him upon Semetey.

The Kyrgyz camp rose in an instant. Cauldrons were overturned, horses saddled; the çoros snatched up their shields, the ranks knotted tight. Bakay gave his white beard to the wind and climbed the rise, studying the dark shape; on his face lay that stone calm which forty years of wars had left behind. Semetey looked as well: even the giant's mule was no ordinary mule, but a monster the size of a camel, its tusks jutting from its jaws. The young hero's heart did not quail; in his heart ran his father's blood, on his back lay his mother's kaftan. Only within himself, letting no one hear it, he thought: all these years I grew up in Buhara not knowing my lineage; today is the day I pay the price of my lineage with my body.

— Which of the Buruts is Semetey? the giant thundered; his voice echoed through the passes, and startled horses reared. — Let him come before me, let him show himself to my single eye, that I may smear his blood on my mule's mane!

Semetey tightened the rein of Taybuurul. On his back was the Akolpok his mother had sewn with her own hands; the white kaftan that Kanıkey had stitched with tears and prayers and forty needles, and made proof against arrows. The young hero spurred his horse and fell upon the giant like a thunderbolt. The distance between them closed in a single heartbeat; the two armies held their breath, and for one moment nothing lived upon the steppe but the sound of hooves. Dınşa swung his mace; the mace struck the Akolpok, struck and rebounded, and the giant blinked his single eye in astonishment. He loosed an arrow; the arrow slid from the kaftan and fell. He drove in his lance; the lance's point blunted and bent. Kanıkey's needle had proved stronger than iron.

Külçoro, who had been raging through the field for his uncle's sake, swept in at that moment from the flank. Rising in the stirrups of his grey horse, he drove his lance into the giant's side, into the soft flesh between the ribs; the giant bellowed and swayed upon his mule. Semetey did not waste the moment: he drove his horse against the giant and bore into him with shoulder and shield; and Dınşa toppled from his mule like a felled black pine, the earth groaned, dust flew up to the sky. Old wolf Bakay arrived with Zülpükor in his hand; that hallowed sword, Manas's legacy, whistled once through the air. Bakay and Külçoro, kneeling upon him from either side, parted the giant's head from his body. The single eye closed, never to open again. The severed head rolled down the slope; and wherever it passed, they say, no grass grew for a year.

The thousand champions, left headless, faltered for a moment; that faltering was their doom. The Kyrgyz attacked, sword against sword, shield against shield; before noon the

thousand monsters were cut down, and the remnant fled in dust toward Beecin. But the victory was not cheap: Bakay had taken wounds in seven places, Külçoro in six. They wrapped the two in felt and drew them back. They opened the healing provisions Kanıkey had sent with the caravan; and the wounds of the warriors who ate of that blessed food — roasted by the mother's own hand, consecrated with her prayers — crusted over in three days, and in seven days only scars remained. Lying on the felt, Bakay turned to the young man at his side, and something like a smile crossed his face:

— Six wounds, he said. Too few for the son of Almambet. Your father used to bring back more than that from Beecin in a single raid.

— You took seven, father, said Külçoro. So there is road yet before me.

The old man laughed; as he laughed his wounds ached, and the more they ached the harder he laughed. As for Semetey — thanks to the Akolpok he had come out of that cataclysm without a scratch. He thought of his mother's needle and his heart twisted: who knew how many nights Kanıkey had gone without sleep while sewing that kaftan, working a prayer into every stitch, a tear into every knot. A mother's heart had become an iron shield for her son.

The joy of victory foamed through the camp like kımız, but it did not last long. Camgırçı, the great lancer of the Eşteks, stroked his white beard and rode forward; he turned the head of his horse Akkökül toward the Hıtay ranks. He was among the last of the old wolves who had seen the age of Manas and swallowed the dust of the Great Campaign; he carried his lance as though he had been born with it in his hand, and to those who asked his age he would say, "Ask my lance." His son Şayımbet tried to stop him, clinging to his stirrup; the old man bent down and stroked his son's head:

— Let go, my child, he said. A true man does not rot in his bed. Half the oath I drank with Manas is still unpaid; today I pay it.

— Konurbay! he called out. — Kalça! If you are a man, come out alone; a khan who hides behind the crowd is no khan to me!

Konurbay came out. Two old wolves, two ancient enemies, wheeled in the middle of the field; lances splintered, shields split. With one thrust Camgırçı slid Kalça from his saddle; Konurbay clung to his horse's neck and barely held on — he came within a breath of kissing the earth. And in that moment the Hıtay horde trampled the law. Like seven wolves falling upon one sheep they swarmed over the old lancer; lassos from every side,

pikes from every side. Camgırçı turned and turned, struck and felled; but the sea cannot be filled with stones, nor a horde thinned by one sword. The kalday warriors surrounded him, dragged him down, and cut off his head. They pulled Akkökül away by the halter and stripped the armor from his back; the great plane tree of the Eşteks lay alone in the middle of the steppe. Şayımbet's cry pierced both armies at once; the young man tried to drive his horse forward, and ten arms seized him — they could not hold him, but they delayed him. Two tears slid from Bakay's eyes and vanished into his beard:

— Camgırçı, he said in a low voice, may your road be white, old wolf. Carry my greeting to Manas.

At this sight the eyes of the Kyrgyz went dark. Semetey in the lead, behind him Kançoro and Külçoro, Bakay and Sarı Han, Kalık, Baytaylak, and Camgırçı's tender son Şayımbet — the army cried out with one voice and attacked. Taybuurul became the wind, Semetey's lance mowed the front rank; Külçoro drove in like a dagger from the right wing, Kançoro from the left. Kalık and Baytaylak struck side by side; Sarı Han's battle-cry alone was worth a company. Until evening the swords did not rest; the Hıtay broke and fled toward Beecin, and the fleeing were pursued. The steppe reddened once more in the crimson of dusk; but in the midst of that crimson, upon a sheet of felt, lay the headless body of Camgırçı. That night, victory and mourning were drunk from the same cup. In the half-dark, Şayımbet — his eyes wet, his heart an ember — knelt before Semetey.

— My bahadır, he said, my father's blood lies unavenged upon the ground. Give me Taybuurul, give me the Akolpok; either I bring back Konurbay's head, or I leave this head of mine out there.

Semetey laid his hand on the young man's shoulder and looked at him long. He knew orphanhood; he knew from his own soul what kind of fire it is to be left fatherless, and how that fire blinds the mind. If he refused, the youth would go in secret and die for nothing; if he granted it, he would be casting two legacies of Manas into the fire. Then he took off the kaftan and dressed the young man in it, and laid Buurul's rein in his palm.

— The Akolpok is in your trust, he said. Buurul is in your trust. But let this hang from your ear like an earring: Konurbay is no easy morsel. Kalça is a wolf of forty years; he feigns flight, then turns and seizes. Bridle your rage, and send your reason on ahead of you.

Şayımbet mounted Buurul; the horse weighed the unfamiliar burden for a moment, then, as if it sensed the trembling in the young man's knee and the grief in his heart, it

stood calm. Those in the camp watched and their hearts ached: the boy who yesterday had walked in his father's shadow had grown old in a single night.

Far off, in the Hıtay camp, torches stretched away like a forest of walnut trees; the droning of drums, the braying of mules, the muttering of tens of thousands filled the night. That night Konurbay gathered his council and counted out the bloody past, one grievance at a time:

— When my father Alööke drove Cakıp with his wives and children into exile in the Altay, I was a child, he said. Then that exile's son, Manas, rose up and came, overturned my forefather's throne, and hammered at the gate of Beecin. Manas died, and we said it was finished; Kanıkey hid his tomb, and we could not even find his grave. We said it was finished; then his son came out of Buhara, cut down Abıke and Köböş, and seated himself in Talas. Three times I tasted death at the hand of Manas's line, and three times I came back; why did I come back? For this day I came back. I swear by the spirits of my ancestors: I will not sheathe this sword until I have torn out the Burut root!

While the words were still in his mouth, a lone rider broke from the opposite slope. The old Bald Sarı, now khan of the Argın — Sarı Han — plunged alone into the midst of six thousand Hıtay; cleaving the crowd, he planted himself before Kalça.

— Konurbay! he cried. — You smothered Camgırçı with a mob — is that manhood? Come, let the two of us settle it between the two of us!

The two horses came nose to nose; the lances rose. But Konurbay did not fight that night; fighting was not his intent. The wolf's mind was on another prey.

✦ ✦ ✦

Kalça called this "the dog-fight": you feign flight, the enemy is deceived and follows; you draw him into the ambush, and those in the ambush close the door. With the morning he laid out his game. He drew back one wing of his army in a mummery of rout; and in the hollows on either side he planted his monsters — Orok Baş with his sickle-shaped head, May Taman whose soles were slick as grease and whose tracks could not be found, and their whole dark company. Orok Baş's head was truly like a sickle: curved, keen, glinting in the sun, reaping whatever it struck. May Taman left no print where he trod; even on snow he walked without a shadow, and you knew of his coming only by the chill at the back of your

neck. Konurbay tucked these two into the hollows and himself took the head of the feigned rout; Kalça's rout was like a wolf's limping — it was meant to draw the lamb closer.

The trap worked. At the sight of the fleeing enemy, Kyrgyz blood boiled; Kalık and Baytaylak sprang forward in pursuit, and the further they pursued the deeper they sank into the throat of the valley. The throat closed. The two warriors were left in the middle of a hundred-armed horde; their horses were tripped with lassos, their arms bound with ropes, and both were carried off as gifts to lay before Kalça. Sarı Han plunged in to rescue them; he plunged, and there he stayed. He took wounds in seventy places, and clinging flat to his horse's neck he barely tore free, riding toward Talas with his blood spilling on the road. Arrows rained after him, but they could not catch him; that day the khan of the Argın was saved by his horse — that, and what was written on his brow.

As for Şayımbet — the young falcon, with the Akolpok on his back and Buurul beneath him, had marked Konurbay from afar and given the reins free. Kalça feigned flight; he fled and fled, and then, at the lip of a ditch, he suddenly turned. He turned, and reaching out he snatched the young man from his saddle as one snatches a cap from a head; he clamped him under his arm and carried him off. They stripped the Akolpok from his back and bound his hands with straps; Şayımbet, a khan's son, they drove behind the herds into a shepherd's slavery. Taybuurul too they caught, casting lasso upon lasso. The hallowed tulpar reared and bit and laid four men on the ground; but they threw twelve halters on him, fastened golden hobbles to his legs, and tethered him in the very navel of the Hıtay camp.

— This horse, said Konurbay with relish, goes to Kakan; he shall be my gift to my Esenhan. We have broken the Burut's wing. But hear me well: while Bakay lives, the Kyrgyz cannot be defeated. While that white-bearded wolf stands, this business is not finished. Muster; we march on Talas!

That night in the Hıtay camp the victory drums were beaten, and the fires licked at the sky. In a hollow, Şayımbet, straps on his feet, lay among the herds; his eyes were on Buurul, tethered in the midst of the torches. The horse was looking at him too. Two captives, in the darkness, silently shared their grief.

✦ ✦ ✦

That night in Talas, above the white palace with its tin-clad gates, the stars burned dim. Bakay saw an evil dream in his sleep: a white falcon fell from the sky, its wing bloodied; a grey mare neighed, and its cry was like a dirge; from the tomb of Manas a smoke arose, and the wind drove the smoke eastward. The old man woke drenched in sweat, looked toward the dawn, and gathered his beard into his fist. In the dappled light seeping through the felt of the grey yurt he sat a while without moving; he knew the dreams of forty years, and could tell which were empty and which were full.

— This dream bodes no good, he said to himself. No good. If a white falcon has fallen, a great man has fallen; if a grey mare has neighed in mourning, a hallowed beast is in enemy hands. Rise, Bakay, rise; black news is on the road — move before it arrives.

When he reached Kanıkey's white palace, the young day was breaking. The tin gates opened; within, Kanıkey was at the first task of morning, dropping milk upon the hearth after the old custom. When she saw Bakay's face the vessel stilled in her hand; for forty years she had known how to read that face. The beys assembled, the çoros lined up; Bakay recounted his dream, and as he recounted it, hoofbeats broke out at the gate. They carried in Sarı Han, blood seeping from his seventy wounds, supporting him under the arms; the warrior sank to his knees at the threshold, his tongue barely turning:

— Camgırçı has fallen, he said. Kalık and Baytaylak are captives. They snatched Şayımbet like a cap and made him a slave. Buurul... Buurul is in enemy hands; they are sending him to Kakan. Konurbay has raised his army and is coming against Talas. If I have come with seventy wounds, I came so that the news would not die with me; now do what you will.

Bakay's dream had proved true: the white falcon was Camgırçı, the grey mare was Buurul. The old man bowed his head; and as far as he bowed it, so far did he raise it again — if mourning lasted long, the enemy would rejoice.

A deathly silence fell upon the palace. Then Kanıkey rose to her feet. Her years were advanced, her sufferings had surpassed the mountains; but her bearing was still straight as a birch, her voice still full of dignity.

— Weeping comes later, she said. Now is the time for work. Open the treasury.

No one gainsaid her; where Kanıkey said "time for work," lamentation fell silent. Locks of forty years turned, iron doors groaned. This treasury had not been opened since Manas's

lifetime, not even in the year of famine; Kanıkey had kept it for one day — for this very day. When Kanıkey's hand touched them, the chests seemed to find their tongues: on Külçoro she put the arrow-proof kaftan she had sewn with her own hands and blessed with forty prayers, and led out for him a grey horse, noblest of the herd. To Kançoro she gave Kök-Telki, and girded on his back armor forged of sky-blue iron. The weapons that the lame master Bölökbay had hammered for seven years at the head of his bellows were poured out into the light: axes like slivers of the moon, tempered swords. From the deepest place came Aktinte — a sword with a darkened sheath and an edge like a star; and the kandagay breeches, kneaded and cured over seven years by the arm-strength of ninety champions. Kanıkey laid these before Külçoro.

— Take them, she said. These were kept against the day they would be needed; that day is today. This kandagay I let wait seven years; ninety champions kneaded it each in turn, and the sweat of all ninety has soaked into it. No arrow pierces it, no sword cuts it. Take Aktinte too; its edge was whetted in moonlight, and in the dark it will show you the way.

Külçoro set his knee to the ground, took the sword in both hands, and raised it to his brow. Kançoro too was arrayed; the sky-iron armor on his back, Kök-Telki beneath him. But his eye lingered a moment too long on what had been given to Külçoro; no one saw this — or perhaps only Kanıkey's heart sensed something, and kept silent.

Then the mother lowered her voice and fixed her gaze on the distance; she told the story of Buurul:

— This horse is not the horse you think it is. Once there was a warrior maiden who defeated Manas's forty çoros one by one: Saykal. On the field of combat she bowed her head to no man; in the end she and Manas were joined in a marriage of the hereafter, pledging to meet not in this world but in the next. That day Saykal gave a gift: a hallowed foal born of one womb with the seven famous tulpars — with Algara, with Maaniker. Buurul is that foal. If Buurul goes, it is not only a horse that goes; the oath of Manas goes, the fortune of the hearth goes. Do not leave him in enemy hands.

The words ended; for a while no one in the white palace drew breath. Kanıkey's eye caught on an old stirrup hanging on the wall — it was Manas's stirrup, left from Akkula's saddle. For a moment the mother went back to those days: to the wedding days of Talas, to the laughter of the forty çoros, then to the black days, the roads of Buhara, Semetey asleep in his swaddling clothes. All of it had passed; and the past had not passed. She shook herself, and straightened.

The army was drawn up in the courtyard. Kanıkey called her two çoros — Külçoro and Kançoro — before her; she opened her white kerchief and blessed the foreheads of both with the milk of her two breasts, gave them the sanction of a mother's milk, and spoke her prayer over them. Bakay raised Zülpükor to the sky:

— Swear! he said. Rescue Buurul, or do not return. Whoever returns alive without Buurul — let him never show himself to my face!

The army repeated the oath with one voice; the oath echoed along the flanks of Ala-Too, touched the snowbound passes, and returned. Three days and three nights they marched; they crossed mountains, they forded torrents. Dust was their companion by day, stars by night; where they camped they rested the horses by leading them, taking little kımız and measuring their words. They crossed the ridge of Keñ-Kol and swung down eastward; on the evening of the third day, when the dark mass of the Hıtay army touched the horizon, they halted. Bakay gathered the army around him; his white beard streamed in the wind, and his voice came from the depths of forty years:

— Listen, he said, know who you are, and fight accordingly. Do you know of Nogoy Han, do you know of Karakan? They were khans; the Hıtay broke them and scattered us to the four winds. They called our exiled forefathers "Burut" — they meant by it outcast, vagrant; so the name was fastened on us, and so the burden was laid. Cakıp lived like a slave in the Altay; then Çıyırdı bore a son, and they named him Manas. Manas came, gathered the scattered, returned to Ala-Too, and pounded his fist upon the gate of Beecin. You are the branches of that root. Do not be the withered branch; remember the root, and fight accordingly. The blood that will be spilled here today is Nogoy's blood, Karakan's blood, Manas's blood; do not spill it cheaply, do not leave it on the ground. Now this is my command: bring me the head of Konurbay. Camgırçı's blood, Şayımbet's straps, Buurul's halter — all of it will be answered for by that head.

The words had scarcely ended when a rider came out from the ranks. It was Külçoro; his face was bright as the dawn, his eyes like embers.

— Father, he said to Bakay; uncle, he said to Semetey; give me leave. If ten thousand go against ten thousand, the trap will work; a crowd devoured Camgırçı, a crowd swallowed Kalık and Baytaylak. Against one man no trap can be laid; one man either passes through or dies. Let me rescue Buurul alone. Let the host remain here, and come up when the day arrives.

They objected, they pleaded. Semetey at first forbade it; Bakay tugged at his beard and pondered, and as he pondered, another light kindled in the old man's eye: these words, this bearing, this stubbornness — this was Almambet himself. The father had risen again in the son. The young man was like stone. At last Semetey bowed his head. They sacrificed a barren white-grey mare; her blood went to the earth, her prayer to the sky. They set her flesh upon the hearth and divided the portions according to custom; the richest portion they laid before Külçoro, and the young man took three mouthfuls and pushed the rest away, saying, "Keep it for my return." Everyone kissed the hero's stirrup weeping, and blessed his road; the old men opened their palms in prayer, the women sprinkled water after him. As Külçoro turned the grey horse's head, he looked back once:

— Count six days, he said. If I do not return in six days, mourn me then and there; and if I return after forty years, still do not wait for me.

Semetey watched after him until the dark shape melted into the horizon. To Bakay at his side, his voice thick:

— I have sent him alone, he said. Did my father send Almambet alone to Beecin as well?

— He did, said Bakay. And Almambet returned. Blood tells, my bahadır. You count the sixth day, and muster your army.

And the lone falcon merged into the half-dark, and was gone.

✦ ✦ ✦

It was midnight when he reached the hill before the enemy camp. Below, the fires of tens of thousands burned like a field of stars; drumbeats, sentries' cries, the braying of mules mingled together. Külçoro drew his horse into a hollow and waited for the dawn. The night was long; the cold seeped into the kandagay. The young man closed his eyes but did not sleep; he thought of his father. Almambet too had once waited like this before Beecin; he too had gone alone among the enemy, knowing their tongue, changing his garb, passing through the midst of the fire. "I am of your road, father," Külçoro said within himself; "let your road not be shamed by me." Then he opened his hands to the sky:

— Manas ata, let your spirit be over me. Almambet, my father, you who knew the tongue of this army, who knew its ways; open your son's eyes, do not let his hand falter. Let Kıdır be my companion, let the çiltens walk at my right hand and my left.

As the horizon paled he made out the sentry-giant at the head of the outpost: Cööceldet — two men tall, his shadow the size of a tent. Külçoro leveled the enchanted musket left him by his father Almambet; that musket whose fire never strayed, whose report could split a mountain. The flint fell, the flame flashed; the giant crumpled like an ox struck between the eyes. Külçoro swept down like lightning, drew Almambet's sword Coykuma, parted the giant's head from his body, and rolled it down the slope.

The camp boiled over. Horns blared, torches ran to and fro; a thousand men climbed the hill, and on the hill they found only the giant's headless trunk, and in the earth the track of a single horse. The track ran east; they rode east, and the track turned west; they rode west, and the track vanished. Almambet's son knew all his father's games.

And the storm that began that day lasted seven days. Seven days and seven nights Külçoro fought alone; now he appeared, now he vanished; he struck from flank to flank, he set fire from tent to tent. By night he held the springs, by day the passes; however many outposts he raided, he left not a whisper behind him. The Hıtay searched with a thousand men and did not find him; whoever found him never told another soul. Rumor swelled in the army: some said there was not one Burut but forty, some said a djinn, some whispered that the spirit of Almambet had come back; by night the sentries doubled, the fires grew, and sleep fled the camp. On the seventh day, behind the herds, he saw a shepherd with straps bound to his feet: it was Şayımbet — his face dust, his eyes still fire. He cut the straps with Coykuma, wrenched the captive from the giants' hands, found a dark bay horse and set him upon it.

— Go to Talas, he said. Say to Bakay: Külçoro lives, and goes for Buurul. Let the army stand ready.

— And you? said Şayımbet. Alone in the midst of a hundred thousand...

— I will not return without Buurul, said Külçoro. You go; your father's blood will yet be asked of you — do not spend yourself for nothing. Live, that vengeance may live.

Şayımbet kissed the young man's hand and merged into the night.

When Konurbay saw the headless body of Cööceldet he went mad; he tore his beard, whipped his kaldays, and roused an army of a hundred thousand to its feet.

— A single Burut! he foamed. A single Burut wanders through my army, and a hundred thousand men cannot bring me one head! Find him; to whoever brings him alive I will give a yambı ingot the size of a horse's back, and to whoever brings his corpse, half of one!

But fear weighed heavier than yambı; the army searched without heart, and no one went into the darkness alone. Konurbay saw this, and wished at least to make the horse secure; he set a new keeper over Buurul: they called him Akayar. But the story of this Akayar, to one who knew it, would melt a heart of stone. He was in truth an Eştek; the blood brother of Camgırçı himself. Years ago in the Orkon desert his road had crossed that of a sorcerer called Ezkara; his mind had been bound by magic, he had been made a captive, and among the Hıtay he had won fame under the name "the Great Champion" — they had even made him a khan. His back bore the kaftan of the Hıtay, but his heart — his heart was still with the Kyrgyz; at night he dreamed always of the steppe, and woke with an ache whose cause he did not know. Now he served in the army of his brother's killer, keeping guard over the horse of his brother's friends, and he knew nothing of it. Ezkara's spell was so great a spell that it had drawn a veil over his name, his lineage, the taste of his mother tongue; only over one thing had it failed to draw a veil — the watering of his eyes whenever he caught the scent of kımız. The Hıtay laughed at this; Akayar laughed too, but his laughter always broke off halfway.

At the end of the seven days Külçoro's kaftan was soaked in blood, his lips cracked, his eyes sunken. He was utterly alone in the midst of a hundred thousand; death circled him on every side. In a hollow he leaned against his horse's neck and lifted his face to the sky:

— Rather than walk alive without Buurul, let me die, he said. I swear it: either the horse, or the earth.

He tightened the arrow-proof armor Kanıkey had sewn, girded on the kandagay; he took Bölökbay's moon-axe at his belt, his father Almambet's Coykuma at his side, and drew Aktinte. At the head of the outpost this time stood another giant: Kancar — some called him Muzmurut, for his mustaches hung like icicles. This time Külçoro laid no ambush; he came into the open, hid his name but did not hide his manhood, and called him to single combat. The giant laughed; and as he laughed his ice mustaches rattled.

— Are you the rat that has been clawing at my army these seven days? he said. Come, let me swallow you in one gulp and collect my yambı from Kalça.

— Swallow, said Külçoro; I will lodge in your throat.

They wheeled, they clashed; axe on shield, shield on axe. Three times they parted, three times they grappled; at the third, Külçoro split the giant's shield with the moon-axe, and into the breach he drove Aktinte to the hilt — the sword Kanıkey had given held fast, unbroken, in the giant's chest. Muzmurut toppled like ice; Coykuma flashed once more, and the head was parted from the body.

Külçoro gathered his breath, then set about a cold-blooded task: he stripped the dead man's sentry garb and drew it over his own back; the giant's plumed helm on his head, the giant's sash at his waist. He was Almambet's son; he had heard the tongues of Beecin in his cradle like lullabies. He plunged into the army, and no one turned to look. Through one company he passed calling out in Şibece, through another trading jests in Solonca; before the Kalmuk tents he put on a Kalmuk accent, and they laughed and gave him way. Once a captain of a hundred barred his path and asked after Muzmurut; Külçoro answered in the giant's own voice, with the giant's own coarseness, and berated him so fiercely that the captain withdrew, apologizing at every step. Column by column, ring by ring, fire by fire he passed; the forty-two-fold encirclement, the forty-two gates, he crossed one by one. At every gate his heart struck once against his chest; at every gate it was as if Almambet's spirit walked one pace ahead of him.

And at last he saw it: in the navel of the camp, in the midst of the torches, stood a horse with golden hobbles and twelve halters. Around him it was like a fortress: in the inner ring picked sentries, behind them staked palisades, behind the palisades tent upon tent; this was the innermost, most tightly woven of the forty-two rings. Konurbay was guarding his gift for Kakan like the apple of his eye. Taybuurul — his head hung low, his mane matted, his eye dull. The hallowed tulpar was in mourning; he had not turned to look at the barley poured before him, and for twelve days he had not neighed. Külçoro drew nearer, nearer; suddenly the horse lifted his head, his nostrils flared — a familiar scent, the scent of Talas, the scent of the hearth. In Buurul's dulled eye a spark kindled.

— Hush, said Külçoro in a whisper, be patient. I have come. Talas waits for you; mother Kanıkey will untie your halter with her own hand. It will not be long.

The horse bowed his head as if he understood; his mane trembled. The tulpar that for twelve days had turned from water and barley sniffed the young man's palm, and knew the old calluses in it, the dust of Talas. Külçoro counted the halters with one part of his mind — twelve halters, each a rope as thick as his wrist; with the other part his ear was on the

night: the spacing of the drums, the order of the watch-calls, the circuit of the torches. Time was short; this work had to be finished before dawn.

He stretched out his hand toward the golden hobble. But beyond the torches, within the darkness, a shadow stirred: Buurul's keeper Akayar, the Great Champion, had risen from his place and was watching the stranger in sentry's garb — and that old ache whose cause he did not know had begun, once again, to throb in his chest.

CHAPTER 28

The Brother from the Unseen and the Rain of Lead

— ❖ —

Night had settled over the Chinese camp like a wet sheet of felt. The embers of a thousand hearths had gone out, and the watchmen's torches were narrowed to wolf's eyes on the distant slopes. Külçoro, thinner than a shadow in the darkness, quieter than a breath, was gliding between the tent-ropes. His heart beat in his chest like a drum, yet his footfall came down lighter than a fox's track on snow. At last he found what he sought: in the very navel of the camp stood a horse, tethered to iron stakes, bound with a twelve-stranded halter, his legs hobbled. It was Buurul; Semetey's captive steed, the living breath of the father's legacy, the grey-dark tulpar that carried the wind of Talas in his mane.

The horse caught the scent of man and pricked his ears. He was about to neigh; Külçoro laid his hand on his muzzle and pressed his own brow against the horse's brow. One human, one beast, they breathed each other in without a word, and shared their grief.

From the horse's great eye a warm tear slid down and fell on the çoro's hand. Külçoro swore an oath within himself: either I free you from this iron, or my bones rot in this foreign land.

He drew his sword. Of the twelve strands of the halter he cut eleven, one by one; at every cut the iron gave a thin shriek into the night, and at every shriek the çoro's heart leapt into his mouth. He cast the last strand from the horse's neck, loosed the hobbles, and bent to the horse's ear:

— Go now, Buurul, he said. Cross the passes no wolf can walk, leap the crags no bird will light on. Go to Talas, go to my lord. Semetey's heart is scorching in your absence; go, and quench that fire.

Buurul turned once and gently took the çoro's shoulder in his teeth, as if to say, "And you?" Külçoro slapped the horse's flank:

— I am a man grown; I will look to my own head. You are a legacy, you are a trust. Go!

The horse went. First a shadow, then a wind, then nothing. The darkness swallowed him, and the camp's sleep was not broken. Külçoro leapt onto his own horse and took the road of return; within him was a joy, a lightness, a breath that filled his chest for the first time in forty days. But joy is most often followed by a snare; those who know this know it, and those who do not, learn it when it falls upon them.

When he reached the narrow throat of the mountain road, a dark shape appeared before him, as if descending from the sky, as if sprouting from the earth. This was no man; it was a piece of mountain, its shoulders brushing the rocks of the pass, its shadow covering the moon. Before Külçoro could tighten the rein and reach for his sword, that huge hand stretched out, plucked the çoro from his saddle as one lifts a feed-bag, and clamped him under its arm. Külçoro's horse shied and fled; the çoro's sword stayed in its sheath, his strength stayed in his arm, useless. With giant strides the creature was climbing the mountain, upward, toward the stone-frozen solitude.

Külçoro writhed, bit, drove in his fists; it was like striking rock. Then he ceased struggling and lamented his fate:

— O black fortune! In the moment I freed Buurul, I fell into the iron trap myself. My lord Semetey waits for me, and no word of me will reach him. If I was to die, I should have died on the field of men; to be carried off under a giant's arm, like a lamb in a sack — what manner of end is that!

The giant stopped. He set the çoro down upon a rock, gently, as one sets down a thing that might break. The moon slid clear of the cloud; and then Külçoro saw: there was no line of China in the giant's face. His brow was broad, his cheekbones carved by the steppe wind, and in his eyes was the longing of a steppe held captive. The giant spoke, not in his own tongue, but in Külçoro's mother tongue; his voice was the rusted yet warm voice of a man who has long been silent:

— Do not struggle, brave one. Had I meant your death, I would have dealt it in the middle of the camp. My name is Akayar. And I... I am not your enemy.

— If Akayar, the mightiest champion of China, is no enemy to a Kyrgyz çoro, then the order of the world has come undone, said Külçoro; he had swallowed his fear and set mockery on the tip of his tongue.

Akayar sank down at the foot of the rock. With his huge hands he wiped his face once, as if wiping away the dust of years.

— The order of the world came undone long ago, child. I am a Kyrgyz. I am a son of the Eştek; Camgırçı is my own blood brother. In my youth I fell under the wrath of Karı han; slander is sharper than the sword — they banished me all the way to the land of the One-Eyed people. For years I ate exile and endured captivity; I broke stone, I carried chains. When Konurbay set out on campaign they unbound me from my chain and put me in his army; his champion in name, in truth his hobbled horse. Tonight, while you were loosing Buurul, I was watching you. And I said to myself: here is one of my blood; here is the road.

The ice within Külçoro broke up like a spring flood. Yet the çoro did not let caution slip from his hand:

— A word is a bird; it flies. Do you know what an oath is, Akayar?

— I know, said the giant. And let us do what those who know do.

The two warriors drew their swords. They touched the blades' edges to their tongues; when the cold of iron meets the tongue, they say, the oath descends into the heart. The moon bore witness, the stone bore witness; the two warriors became brothers. Akayar, without letting his voice reach even the wind of the pass, poured his plan into Külçoro's ear:

— Konurbay and Ezkara possess armor that no arrow pierces; while those two coats stay on their backs, no sword bites them, no bullet passes. I will remain inside, watch for my moment, and take those coats of armor. When the battle thickens I will rise for the

Kyrgyz from within. You go to your lord and say: you have a brother come out of the unseen; when the day arrives, he will be known.

— I will say it, said Külçoro. Only stand by your word.

— If I would not stand by my word, this tongue would not have drunk this oath, said Akayar.

That night Akayar returned to the camp; he returned, but not as the old Akayar. As he entered, the watchmen barred his way; they demanded who he was, refused him passage, and one of them thrust his torch into the giant's face and snarled, "Where do you come from at midnight?" Akayar gave no answer; with all the fury of his years of exile he went to the sword, and put those who barred his way to the blade one by one. Wiping his bloody sword with snow, he looked up at the sky and swore once more within himself: I am returning to my people. Forty years I carried another's sword; from this day this iron cuts only for the right of my own blood. If I die, let me die on Kyrgyz soil; if I live, let me live by a Kyrgyz hearth.

✦ ✦ ✦

Buurul journeyed three days and three nights; he crossed passes no wolf could walk, leapt from crags no bird would light on, forded waters whose ice cut like a dagger. In the middle of the third night Talas came into view; in the moonlight the white tents lay like a flock of swans. The horse found Semetey's tent by its scent; he halted before the tent and gave such a neigh that the sleeping army rose to its feet, the horse-herds answered, and the mountains sent the echo back three times.

Semetey burst out; his feet bare, his chest open, a naked sword in his hand. His eyes first refused to believe, then filled. Taking the horse standing in the moonlight for a dream, he passed his hand over his eyes; the horse stayed where it stood, and the dream did not scatter. He threw his arms around the neck of his father's legacy; the horse laid its head on the hero's shoulder. Neither was the horse the horse it had been, nor the hero the hero he had been; both had known captivity, both had tasted separation. In the middle of the steppe, the communing of a man and a horse lasted until the horizon paled; and the çoros ringed around them, the grizzle-bearded elders, the warriors pressing their caps to their

chests, wept in silence. The heart's burning scattered like an ember sprinkled with water; but beneath the ember it was hot still: if Buurul had come, where was Külçoro?

Semetey combed the horse's mane and searched out, one by one, the wounds the hobbles had left on his pasterns; at every wound he clenched his teeth.

— Who bound you, who drove in this iron? he asked, as if expecting an answer. Does the hand that bound you think it will escape my hand? Tell me, Buurul: is my lamb alive? If it was not he who loosed you, who was it; and if it was he who loosed you, why could he not loose himself and come?

The horse only neighed; there was no interpreter for the tongue of horses. Old Bakay drew near, laid his hand on the horse's brow, closed his eyes a moment; then turned to Semetey:

— If the horse has come home safe, then he who loosed him is safe as well, he said. Wounded news travels faster than sound news; had something evil happened, we would have heard it long since. Be patient, my child. Patience is a man's second sword.

Külçoro, in the flurry of his joy and the weight of his oath, had forgotten one thing: to send his lord greeting, token, and word concerning Akayar. That forgetfulness came within a breath of making two mountains break each other.

For on the next day, down the eastern ridge of Talas, came a lone rider. The horse was a hill, the rider a mountain; his shadow darkened the valley, and the earth shook where he passed. When the watchers brought word, Semetey mounted Buurul and rode out to meet him. The two strangers halted, a bowshot apart, and took each other's measure.

— Who are you, what are you, stranger? called Semetey. If you are a friend, my table is open; if a foe, my sword is ready.

Akayar's tongue seemed tied; he had words to speak and a secret to carry, but in the eyes of the young lion before him the sword of suspicion was already drawn. He had come thinking, "Külçoro will have sent word; he expects me"; there was no word, no one expecting him, only a heart ready for the grapple. Pride weighed heavy on both sides.

— My name is not asked; it is read by the sword, said Akayar. If you are a man, come down to the field.

They came down. First they clashed on horseback; lances struck lightning from shields, the horses collided flank against flank, the stones beneath their hooves sprayed sparks. And they fought such a fight that those who saw it told their grandchildren, and the

grandchildren told theirs. The sun rose and they fought; the sun set and they fought; the swords blunted, and they took up maces; the maces shattered, and they turned to lances; the lances broke, and they seized each other's sashes and wrestled. By night two fires were kindled, and the two warriors drew breath each at his own fire, rising again at dawn; neither reached a hand toward the other's fire, neither sent a sword into the other's sleep — for a man knows what is owed to a man. One day passed, two days passed, three days and three nights passed; Semetey could not throw Akayar, nor could Akayar shake Semetey. On the fourth day they grappled in a fog of dust; on the fifth in sweat, blood, and stubbornness; on the sixth in stubbornness alone. The army stood ringed about them, and no one dared to step between; when two mountains collide, whatever is caught between is crushed.

On the seventh day a rider came off the horizon like a thunderbolt: Külçoro. From afar he saw the grapplers, his heart leapt into his mouth, he lay flat along his horse's neck, reached them, and flung himself between the two:

— Stop! he cried. Stop, you whose blood is one! My lord, do not strike; this man is not your enemy, he is your brother come out of the unseen! Akayar, hold; this lion is Semetey, for whose sake you swore your oath!

The two warriors stopped, their chests rising and falling like bellows. Külçoro, as fast as his tongue could turn and his breath could carry, told it all: the freeing of Buurul, the night on the mountain, the secret of the Eştek's son, the licked blade, the oath drunk, and the greeting he himself had forgotten. As he spoke, Semetey's brows loosened, Akayar's shoulders came down. At last Semetey drove his sword into its sheath, took two steps, and clasped the giant's hands:

— Seven days I swung my sword at you; seven days God would not let my sword take you. It seems, then, that brotherhood was written on our brows. Welcome, son of the Eştek. Welcome, brother come out of the unseen.

That night, in Semetey's pavilion, at the head of the hearth, Akayar poured out all the secrets of Beecin: Konurbay's temper and his cunning, the twitching of his left eye when anger took him, whose counsel deceived him and whom he secretly feared; the ancient grudge Ezkara nursed against the line of Çubak; by which pass the forty tribes of China would march and by which water they would camp, which soothsayer they had cast bones for and which sorcerer had bound eyes for them, and in which chest, behind how many locks, the arrow-proof coats of armor were kept. Semetey listened; and as he listened, the dark road before him seemed to grow light. Old Bakay listened too, on the far side of the

hearth, and the fingers combing his white beard paused from time to time; Külçoro committed to memory the places where the old man paused, for wherever Bakay's finger rested, there lay the knot of fate. The news spread from tent to tent, from camp to camp; the Kyrgyz land surged with joy. The grizzle-bearded said to one another:

— It is not Akayar who has come to us; it is fortune itself that has come.

✦ ✦ ✦

The next day a feast was raised in Talas; such a feast that those who saw it remembered the funeral feast of Kökötöy. Mares were slaughtered, cauldrons set up, kımız flowed like a flood; Baabedin was invoked, offerings were vowed, prayers rose to the sky. The slopes of Keñ-Kol were arrayed with grey yurts; riders galloped from camp to camp, and not a soul was left uninvited. Nine days and nine nights the festival did not cease; wrestlers grappled, horses raced, bards contended in verse. Children climbed onto Akayar's knee and gazed up at him, their heads small enough to fit in his palm; the giant stroked each one's hair as if he were stroking his own lost years. Akayar was seated at the place of honor by the hearth; and every word that fell from the mouth of this great warrior — lettered, far-traveled, much-seeing — dropped like seed into the hearts of the young. At last the white-bearded elders gathered and resolved:

— This man knows letters, knows roads, knows the law. Let his name henceforth be Muraapı; let us hold him a father, and seat him at the place of honor.

And they gave Akayar the name Muraapı; the Kyrgyz land took him for a father. That night, for the first time since the first night of his exile, Akayar slept without dreams; the stone of forty years, they say, lifted from his chest that night. But the sound of joy does not travel to friendly ears alone; the enemy's ear is quicker to the sound of joy than a wolf's.

The news reached Beecin: Buurul stolen away, Akayar gone over to the Kyrgyz, a feast raised in Talas. When Konurbay son of Alööke heard it he became fire itself with fury; his mustaches bristled as if they would drink blood, his eyes ran red, his teeth ground. With his fist he cracked the pillar of his ordo, rose to his feet, and sent word to the khans, the champions, the alps, and the soothsayers of the forty tribes of Hıtay:

— Muster! My horse is unrecognized, my name goes unspoken. From the navel of my army a horse has been stolen; my army's champion has fled to the enemy; and the Kyrgyz

hold their feast chanting my name. The fled horse, the turned traitor, the laughing Kyrgyz — I will call each to account, one by one. I swear it: I will scour the Kyrgyz from their homeland; in Talas no hearth shall smoke, no grey yurt shall rise, no kımız shall foam!

The soothsayers cast their lots, burned bones, read the stars; some said "victory," some kept silent. One of the silent Konurbay had strangled with his own order; after that, every augury showed victory. The khans of the forty tribes bent the knee one after another; Ezkara sat foremost, his face yellowed with hatred, and each time the name of Çubak was spoken he tore the flesh of his palm with his nails.

Soldiers streamed from the forty tribes; tümens swarming like ants formed up along the roads. The dust cloud could be seen from three days' distance, and the earth groaned and groaned under the army's weight. Messengers reached Talas: they are coming.

That day old Bakay, his white beard on his breast, his white kalpak on his head, gathered the old warriors and the young lions around him. That ancient heart, which had seen so many of Manas's campaigns and borne so many of his griefs, stood once more like a mountain; his voice, in defiance of his years, was like a flood torn loose from the heights:

— O men of the Kyrgyz! The enemy is a multitude; he who boasts of multitude is tested in singleness. Which of you will go out to single combat against that swelling infidel? Who will step onto the field of men and brighten the face of this people? And hear this: this war is no war of skirmish and retreat. We will fight driving flesh against bone; we will herd the Hıtay before us and hound them all the way to Kakan. Either we give our heads, or the homeland remains; there is no middle way between the two.

The field fell silent for a moment. Then a warrior sprang from among the ranks; it was Kançoro, son of Çubak. He bent his knee, bowed his head, and spoke without a tremor in his voice:

— Bakay, my father! There are those in this land who call me "slave"; the word falls before my name like a shadow, and gives me no rest day or night. Grant me leave; let me be the one to take the field. If I die, let them not say "a slave died" — let them say "a valiant çoro died," and let my bones be buried by my people's rite. If I live, let that black word dissolve in the temper of my sword.

A murmur swept the field; some eyes filled, some chests swelled. The white-bearded elders of the four nations opened their palms and gave their blessing. Bakay kissed his brow:

— May the word that has left your mouth be written on your brow, he said. May the tongue that called you slave wither; from this day you are Kançoro, son of Çubak, and nothing else.

Sarı han clasped his shoulder, Külçoro crushed his twin lamb to his breast; the two çoros set brow against brow and were silent for the space of a breath. What the two hearts said to each other in that silence, only those who have boiled in one cauldron can know. Semetey took his two çoros to either side of him and, his eyes brimming, spoke to the assembly:

— These are the gifts left to me by my father's brother Çubak; one is my right arm, one my left. May God make both of them my shield.

Kançoro mounted; he flicked Baytaylak's rein and glided onto the field. And from the opposing ranks came Konurbay's chosen scourge: Çandıayak, son of Kococaş. This was a cunning marksman; he knew sorcery, they said, could blind the eye, struck whatever he aimed at, and what he struck never rose again. He came swaying on his horse like a serpent, and cracked his tongue like a whip:

— You slave of the Kyrgyz! Your father Çubak devoured the head of my father Kococaş; an ancient vengeance demands fresh blood. Come, come, that I may portion your bones out to the dogs of Talas; come, that I may make your name unspoken even by the wind!

— The vengeance is yours; the field is mine, said Kançoro. Spin no more words; words are the business of wives and husbands, the field is the business of men.

They fought. The two armies were drawn up on the two slopes, watching without breath; the dust of the field was on the knees and brows of both. Kançoro attacked like a lion; his lance rocked Çandıayak's shield twice, his sword grazed his shoulder once. A roar rose from the Kyrgyz ranks; there were those who cried, "On, my lamb — on, son of Çubak!" But the son of Kococaş was no man of the straight fight; he bent to trickery, gave ground, wheeled, feigned flight, drew him toward the ambush. An enchanted arrow whined; Baytaylak screamed in pain. A second arrow, a third; the beast went down, was dragged, was torn apart. Kançoro was left on foot; and a man on foot against a mounted trickster is a wounded lion: majestic still, but his blood runs out.

Çandıayak was not content; he called his comrade down from the slope:

— Çoñkara! Come down — the lion is in the trap!

Çoñkara the alp came down; a mace big as a nomad's loaded tent on his shoulder, his shadow over Kançoro. They pinned him from two sides. Kançoro turned, wheeled, rained sword-strokes; if he struck at one, the other bore in; if he turned on the other, the first tripped him. He had been parted from Külçoro; a bird with one wing cannot fly, a man with one arm cannot break free. At last they cast a net over him, flung ropes, wound lassos round him; they smothered the hero in dust and bound his arms behind his back with straps.

The Hıtay swarmed over him; some kicked, some spat. One of them, in a soothsayer's garb, read out Konurbay's command:

— This is the son of Çubak. Ezkara's forefather fell to Çubak's sword; send this one to Ezkara, that he may take his ancient vengeance. Bind him to a mule and set him on the road to Beecin!

They bound Kançoro face-down across a mule's back. The hero, burning at having fallen into a pit from which there is no climbing, keened a lament for his black fate; and the lament, jolted with the mule's every stride, echoed through the desolate passes:

— O black fate, O turncoat fortune! I thought I stepped onto the field of men, and I fell into the pit of trickery. No Kyrgyz stands at my side; Bakay my elder, who would part the fray and pluck me free, is not here. Külçoro, my twin lamb, where are you? Semetey my sultan, your Kançoro, whom they called your slave, rides bound on a mule's back; he does not grieve to go to his death — he burns at going nameless. O water of Talas, you are witness; O snow of Ala-Too, you are witness: I did not flee, I was cornered; I did not bow, I was bound!

✦ ✦ ✦

The news lit on Talas like a black bird: Kançoro taken captive. When Külçoro heard it he could not stay in his place; his heart beat like a falcon that cannot fit its cage. He went straight to Bakay's tent and bent his knee:

— Bakay, my father, grant me leave. Kançoro is my twin lamb; we boiled in one cauldron, we raised our heads through one collar. If he rides bound on a mule's back while I sit at the hearth, then meat is forbidden me and sleep is poison to me. Let me go; let me

creep close under the enemy's watchtowers; let me learn whether he is alive or dead. And if on the road I meet Konurbay — that too is my portion.

Old Bakay looked at him long; in his eyes were both fear and pride.

— I know the pain of the wing torn from its fellow, he said. Go, my child. But do not forget: what trickery has felled, rage does not raise; reason raises it. Let your eye be keen and your heart be cool. May God open your road; may Kıdır be your companion.

Külçoro mounted, and before the horizon paled he set out alone toward the enemy's watch-line. In that same hour, on the far side of the plain, the two armies had drawn close together, and the field between them lay as if swept clean for death.

And before the army rode out Semetey himself.

He came on Buurul, wrapped in his arrow-proof mantle; on his head the standard passed down from his father, in his hand Akkelte, on his back the Akolpok that mother Kanıkey had sewn with forty maidens in forty nights. And he was not alone: to those given the sight, unseen guardians glided at his side. On his right swayed a sky-grey leopard, on his left walked a tiger, behind him a dragon flowed licking the earth, and above his head Alpkarakuş spread its wings. The çiltens rode with the lion; and the infidel's soothsayers, seeing this, went paper-pale, and a shudder ran along the ranks.

Çandıayak, at the foot of the slope, wheeled his horse and looked upon this majesty; he looked, and — fearing to confess it even to himself — thought: "Would that this man were my man; would that I marched beneath that standard. To be a slave before such a sultan is better than to be a chief beside a thousand khans." But blood is thicker than water, and vengeance is sweeter than honey; the son of Kococaş shook his head and quenched that one handful of light in his heart. "My father's vengeance," he said to himself. "I will bind the two çoros side by side, and load the sultan onto a mule for the third; that is how I will return to Beecin."

At the far end of the field, meanwhile, Külçoro had already collided with the first scourge to bar his road: Çoñkara the alp was coming at him, whirling his tent-sized mace above his head. The mace came down; Külçoro slid his horse aside, the mace beat the earth, and the earth gave a crater. The mace rose again; this time Külçoro did not evade — he sprang forward, gripped his sword in both hands, and struck such a blow that the great mace cracked in two at its middle; the iron head buried itself in the soil, and half the shaft stayed in Çoñkara's hand. The alp stared stupidly at the stump in his grip; and in that one

breath of staring, Külçoro's sword finished its work. The spine of the Hıtay bent there that day; the front ranks boiled backward, the wave coming behind pressed forward, and the army floundered under its own weight.

Seeing this, Çandıayak gave up hope of the straight fight and seized on sorcery. He dismounted, drew nine lines upon the ground, turned black words in his mouth, and scattered enchanted powders from his pouch. And the day, in broad daylight, went dark. The sun went out as if a palm had covered it; the birds fled to their nests, the horses' eyes grew wide. The light withdrew, the sky sank low, the clouds seethed like a cauldron; from six quarters hail burst loose — big as fists, hard as ice, swift as arrows. The hail drummed on men, on the flanks of horses, on the faces of shields; the soldiers could not open their eyes, the horses could not lift their heads.

Out of that darkness Çandıayak leveled his matchlock. He fired; he fired again; a hundred times, five hundred times, a thousand times he fired. He mingled his enchanted arrows among the shots; and each arrow, as it whined, seemed to call Semetey by name. The bullets struck the Akolpok and dropped like hailstones; the arrows slid off the white kaftan's face and buried themselves in the earth; every stitch that mother Kanıkey had sewn held like a prayer. Nor was Semetey idle; he leveled Akkelte, and each time the father's weapon roared, a breach opened in the darkness and a scream swelled in the infidel ranks.

But sorcery, though it does not tire the flesh, gnaws at strength. Buurul, under the road of three days and three nights, the wrestling of seven days, and this rain of lead, grew weary; his breath ran hot, his stride shortened, his flanks trembled. Semetey stroked the horse's neck:

— A little longer, my legacy, a little longer, he said. Shall one who broke free of iron hobbles be beaten by the weariness of flesh?

The horse shook its head and took one more stride; but beneath the stride there seemed to be not earth but mire. The Hıtay saw it; a multitude scents the tiring one as a wolf does. A tümen from the right, a tümen from the left, three tümens from behind; ring upon ring they closed. One fold, three folds, eighteen folds deep was Semetey encircled. One looking on from without would have seen a single rock in the midst of a dark sea: the grey-wolf sultan standing alone in the middle of the army, like Mount Kaf. Each time his sword fell, the ring opened; each time his sword rose, the ring closed again. Death waited outside the circle like a patient creditor. Those who saw it from the Kyrgyz ranks beat their

breasts, the old men tore their beards; but every charge that tried to break through was shattered in the darkness and under the hail, and thrown back.

In that very hour, on the ridge at the field's edge, a rider appeared. It was Külçoro; following Kançoro's trail he had heard the thunder, seen the darkness, and his heart had told him, "Turn back." From the height he looked, and he saw: his lord, alone, within eighteen folds of the enemy. What he saw became a lesson to him, the lesson became fire, the fire became a battle-cry. He filled his chest and hurled to the sky the name of the father of fathers:

— Han Manas! Han Manas! Han Manaas!

That cry echoed as if the heavens were splitting; the hail seemed to pause a moment, the darkness thinned a moment. The Hıtay soldiery knew that name; that name was the nightmare of their fathers. Külçoro loosed his horse down the slope like a flood off a cliff and plunged alone into the army. His sword turned like a millstone; where he entered there remained a road, where he passed there remained a rent. He split one fold, he split three; as one unravels a net, as one unpicks a weave, he scattered the eighteen folds and reached his lord's side.

— Have you come, my lamb? said Semetey; in his voice were seven days of weariness and seven years of joy.

— I have come, my sultan. Once I forgot a greeting, and you paid seven days for it; if ever I leave your side again, strike out my name. From this day forward, wherever your sword falls, my sword falls beside it.

Now the two were side by side; their lances parallel, their horses shoulder to shoulder, their backs each in the other's trust. One struck to the right while the other guarded the left; while one drew breath, the other's sword turned for two. When two heroes became one, the eighteen folds lost their power; the circle widened in fear, and as it widened it thinned, and as it thinned it tore. In the Hıtay ranks the cries of "back!" began to drown the cries of "forward!"; the banners swayed, the drums faltered, and that old name — the name of Manas — worked into the heart of the multitude like cold water.

But Çandıayak did not yield. The son of Kococaş changed his skin once more: one moment he was seen in red, raining arrows from the right slope; the next in green, emptying his gun from the left ridge. No one could catch him, no one could fix his place; arrows like rain, bullets like hail poured without pause upon the two lions. The Akolpok

held; Akkelte answered; but the day was dark still, the sorcery fresh still — and at the far edge of the field, on a road no one watched, a mule with a bound warrior on its back was drawing away toward Beecin, stride by stride.

Semetey, beneath the rain of lead, lifted his head for a moment; beyond the darkened sky, to the east, he looked toward Beecin. There, at the enemy's table, his brother's fate would be laid out like a game; and every game has its price, and every price its cost in blood. The lion knew this in his heart, and gripped his sword the tighter.

— Hold on, Kançoro, he said, in a voice no one heard. This rain will pass. And we will come.

CHAPTER 29

A Game at the Enemy's Table and the Price of Blood

— ❖ —

Once more the gates of Beecin vomited iron. For seven days and seven nights the soothsayers of Esenkan's line had cast their lots, burned their incense, thrown the bones and counted the stars, and at last they had agreed upon a single name: Çañdıayak. He was marksman and sorcerer both; the arrow he loosed tracked its quarry through darkness like a serpent, and the spells he uttered shrouded the sky like black felt. It was said his mother had borne him in a cave, on the night of an eclipse of the moon; it was said that even in the cradle he had turned the milk he suckled into venom. Legion upon legion of soldiers formed up behind him; the standards rose, the horns blared, the drums were beaten, the earth shook. When the dust cloud lifted like a mountain at the edge of the steppe, Semetey and Külçoro understood that their road had been cut. They had only just come out of the rain of lead; before their wounds had cooled, before the sweat had dried on their horses, this black flood had heaped itself across their path.

The arrows fell like rain. As though the sky had been pierced and iron were pouring through the breach, the whine of them never ceased for an instant. Before the smoke of Akkelte had cleared, a fresh charge was rammed home; before a sword had left its scabbard, a shield was split. Arrows drove into the felt, arrows drove into the saddles, arrows stood planted in the earth like sown grain. Semetey, bent low over the neck of the tulpar his father had left him, watched that black flood from beneath his brows. Count them he did: for every enemy who fell, ten more came on; could a sea be dried up with a sword? For a moment, only a moment, doubt fell upon his heart: to turn back, to withdraw to Talas, to go and kneel at the knee of white-bearded Bakay and ask his counsel, to gather strength and come again... Before this thought could pass his lips, Külçoro drove his horse in front of him. The çoro had read what moved behind his elder brother's eyes; true warriors read one another's hearts in one another's faces.

— My elder brother, he said, and his eyes burned like live coals, at the back of him who flees, death itself laughs, and the enemy laughs too. We came from the hearth of Manas; sooner than flee, we die fighting hand to hand. If you turn back, may your road be open — I stay here.

The blood rushed to Semetey's face. Not from shame, but from that ancient fire that came with the blood. He tightened his rein and levelled Akkelte.

— The word is your word, Külçoro. If we die, in one grave; if we live, beneath one standard.

The two warriors set themselves before the legions like two rocks.

But Çañdıayak knew that this contest would not be decided on the field of men. From the first day he had understood that those who faced him would not be toppled by the sword; very well then — let the sky itself be toppled upon them. He loosed the black words he kept beneath his tongue and flung them at the heavens; he licked the rain-stone in his palm and held it up to the wind. In full daylight the sun went out. The sky darkened like the belly of a soot-blackened cauldron; fog settled thick as felt; hail fell, stone upon stone, each the size of a sheep's head. Not for one day, not for five; for fifteen days and fifteen nights the world turned to night. The horses shied and screamed, the grass of the earth turned to ice, stone split apart, no bird flew, no caravan passed. The steppe seemed to have forgotten its own face; the name of day remained, but day itself had gone.

Even in that darkness the arrows found their road. Akolpok, the arrow-proof armour that Mother Kanıkey had once sewn stitch by stitch and prayer by prayer, that blessed mail,

began to come apart at its seams. Each rent was like the place where a mother's sigh had broken loose. When Semetey put his hand to his breast and felt the tear, it was as though his fingers touched his mother's fingers as they had held the needle through the nights of Bukhara; his heart ached within him. His powder drank the damp, his quiver emptied; his last arrow left the bow and did not return. The warrior stood alone in the midst of a night black as pitch. There was no star to show the road, no voice to warm the heart; only the beating of hail on stone, and his own breath. A voice within him said, "Did my father Manas stand this alone before Beecin? Did the sky darken like this when Almambet and Çubak fell? I grew up an orphan, I never saw my father's face; shall I now be stretched out upon the very earth where he died?" Despair slid into his bosom like a cold serpent. He laid his hand upon the hilt; even the hilt had gone cold.

At that very moment there came the sound of hooves, tearing the darkness open. It was Külçoro; his sweat had frozen, his lashes were bound with hoarfrost, but his eye was still his eye. He came to his elder brother's side, dismounted, and struck his knee to the ground.

— My elder brother, he said, this sorcery cannot be cut with the sword nor pierced with the arrow. Give me six days' grace. In six days either I untie the knot of this black cloud, or never speak my name again.

— Where will you go in this pit of darkness?

— The enemy's outpost is held by Cezbilek, son of Şıpşaydar; he is a giant like a mountain, the eye and ear of Çañdıayak. First I will bring him down. The rest, heaven knows, and I know.

Semetey laid his hand on his çoro's shoulder. He spoke no word; the word was in the pressing of that hand. Külçoro leapt to his horse and melted away into the fog.

Toward Kara-Üñkür, at the foot of the rocks, Külçoro lay in ambush three days and three nights. He did not stir, he did not cough; he became stone beside the stone, root beneath the root. Hoarfrost clung to his beard, hunger gnawed at his belly; he paid it no heed. A saying of his father Almambet's lived in his heart: patience is the hunter's first arrow. In the grey hour of the fourth day Cezbilek appeared: his height a hill, his shadow a valley, his breath a blizzard. The rocks cracked as he walked, and the broadsword at his sash swung like the leaf of a door. When the giant had settled by the outpost fire and set to gnawing the whole haunch of a horse, Külçoro closed his hand around his charmed spear. That spear had known the breath of the saints; it did not gleam, but it did not miss. In a

single breath he rose, the spear whistled, entered at the giant's collarbone and found his heart. Cezbilek toppled like a felled plane tree; the earth groaned twice, and the embers of the fire were flung into the air. Külçoro cut off the giant's head, and when his bloody work was done he stripped the giant's mountainous garments and drew them over his own back; the kaftan hung loose, so he wadded it with felt; he set the giant's cap on his head and pulled the giant's boots up his legs; he slid the giant's ring-stone onto his finger and hung the talisman pouch at his neck. Had there been a mirror, his own mother would not have known him. He was no longer Külçoro; he was Çoñbalban, the Chinese strongman. He changed even his gait: shoulders back, chin high; he walked in arrogance, for giants walk in arrogance.

When he came to the pavilion of Çañdıayak, he folded his hands and bowed in the manner of Kıtay.

— Great sorcerer, he said, I am the son of Madıkan, khan of Sazañşañ; men call me Çoñbalban. At the outpost Cezbilek and I embraced and swore brotherhood; it is he who sent me to you. They say a khan's daughter goes to him who brings the Burut's head; I have come for that head.

Cunning was Çañdıayak; but pride binds the eyes even of the cunning. He looked at the giant frame before him, at the polished Kıtay speech, at the noble names, and his heart grew fat with pleasure. "A kinsman has come," he said, "a khan's son and a strongman both. The Burut's head now lies between two hands." He spread his table, and in place of kumis he poured the wine of his own hands; he showed the secrets of his tent, told by what word the hail was made to fall and by what breath the fog was made to settle; then, warming to his boasting, he laid out all his weapons before his guest as gifts — his bow, his quiver, his talisman stones. The man who longs to boast opens the door of his treasury with his own hand. A sorcerer without his weapons is like a bird without feathers; Külçoro knew this, and smiling, giving thanks, he waited in patience. What passed within him he did not let show upon his face; his face was the face of Çoñbalban, his heart the heart of Almambet.

When the hour ripened, in that uncertain time between night and day, Külçoro stretched out his hand and seized the halter of Çañdıayak's horse; then he fastened upon the sorcerer's collar. And such a grip was that grip that their wrestling lasted seven days and seven nights. Now the sorcerer turned to smoke and scattered, now he turned to stone and grew heavy; Külçoro did not let go. The earth sank into hollows where they trod, the rocks were ground to flour where they touched. At the end of the seventh day Külçoro broke the

sorcerer's knee with the shaft of the charmed spear, knelt upon his chest, and bound his hands strap upon strap. Then he loaded him onto a mule, as one packs a gift into a saddlebag.

The grace he had asked was long since spent and overspent; but Semetey had not stirred from his place. "If Külçoro lives, he will come," he had said; "if he is dead, I myself will gather his bones." As he waited, his eye on the road and his heart in his mouth, there appeared at the place where the fog parted first the head of a mule, then the white blaze of a horse's brow, then Külçoro himself. Coming before Semetey, he made the mule kneel and set down his burden.

— My elder brother, he said, here is the thing that blackened the heavens. Take him; pronounce your judgment in the presence of your fathers.

Semetey looked once at the sky, whitening again as Çañdıayak's spell unravelled; the sun he had not seen for fifteen days was painting the backs of the snowbound passes with silver. Then he turned to the sorcerer kneeling on the ground. His voice came as from a deep well.

— My father Manas's blood was left unavenged upon the earth. The blood of Almambet, of Çubak, of Sırgak was left upon the earth. The blood of the forty çoros, of warrior upon warrior... Today is the day that blood is paid for.

Zulpukor slid from its sheath; when the daylight touched the steel, the sword seemed to howl once, only once, like a wolf. Semetey, naming it the blood-price of his fathers, cut Çañdıayak into eighty-five pieces; each piece was the answer to a grief left lying on the earth. The crows of the steppe ate their fill that day.

✦ ✦ ✦

The news flew to Beecin like a black bird: Çañdıayak taken alive, cut into eighty-five pieces; Cezbilek's head parted from his body, the legions leaderless, the spell broken, the sky opened. As Konurbay listened to this news in his horde-camp, his brows knotted and the vein at his temple swelled; he gripped the golden goblet in his hand so hard that it buckled. His old counsellor Ezkara came forward, leaning heavily on his staff.

— My khan, he said, if a sorcerer such as Çañdıayak is gone, the road left to us is retreat. Let us take shelter in the Kakan's country; a day will come when we gather strength again.

Konurbay gave the old man such a look that the look cut sharper than a sword.

— You have grown senile, Ezkara! he thundered. With white fallen upon your beard, you speak of flight. I am the son of Alööke Han, I am the khan of Keçil; in my line flight is not written. Rather than flee from the Burut, let us be slaughtered to the last man! Let the forty tribes of Kakançı hear it: whoever takes one step backward, his head belongs to my sword.

The army was rallied by that oath; but it was the body that rallied, not the heart. At night, around the hearth-fires, the soldiers whispered: arrows could not bite Semetey; the çiltens guarded Külçoro; Kıdır himself walked behind the two of them; could a sword stand against the hand that had felled a mountain like Cezbilek with a single spear... The whispering spread through the army like mould; and as no bread is made from mouldy dough, no soldier is made from a frightened heart.

Konurbay's own counsellors spoke no differently in the pavilion. One said:

— My khan, Semetey is the seed of Manas; he was kneaded with prayer in his mother's womb, and grew up in Bukhara under the shadow of Kıdır.

Another said:

— Külçoro is the son of Almambet; his father's vengeance came in with his milk teeth. The saints have turned him back from death forty times.

A third, lowering his voice almost to nothing, added:

— The sword of man's making does not bite these two lions, my khan. If it did, Çañdıayak would not now be in eighty-five pieces.

Konurbay was silent. He was silent because rage and helplessness had sat down at the same table in his heart for the first time.

On the Talas side, meanwhile, another reckoning was turning. Külçoro had harvested from Çañdıayak's tent not weapons only, but words: the custom of Kıtay, the prayers to the burkan, the branches of the genealogies — he had learned them one by one from the sorcerer's own mouth. "The door that will not open to the sword opens to the tongue," he said to himself; "an army will not fit inside Konurbay's fortress, but one lie will." Nor did

he do this without his elder brother's counsel; at night, by the hearth, he tied the first knot of his design, and alone, in the garb of Kıtay, he took the road to Beecin.

And so, into the midst of that helplessness, on a day among days, the gate-guards brought in a stranger. Tall as a cypress, shouldered like a crag, honey-tongued; a warrior dressed in Kıtay fashion, walking in Kıtay fashion. He bowed before Konurbay according to the rite, straightened, and spoke without dropping his eyes.

— Great khan, he said, I come from a far land, but my blood is not far from yours. We are sprung from our forefather Çılaba; our root is one, our stock is one. Year upon year I dwelt among the Burut; I learned their tongue, I mastered their ways; but my flesh is Kıtay flesh and my bone is Kıtay bone. Now I have come to return to my own root. Let me worship the burkan of the Kalça, let me die beneath your standard — that is my wish.

This warrior was Külçoro; he had buried his Kirghiz self beneath his tongue and left his name behind the fog. Konurbay studied him long. Proud eyes love what resembles themselves; in those broad shoulders the khan saw his own youth. Yet he did not believe at once; the suspicion of a man who has fought Manas for forty years does not fall asleep easily. He tested him: he made him recite his lineage, and he recited it — seven generations down from Çılaba, name by name, flowing like water; he questioned him on custom, and he knew it — how he sat down at the table, how he held the cup, how he returned a greeting, everything in its proper place; he made him kneel before the burkan, and he knelt. As Külçoro's knee touched the earth his heart was in Talas, but his brow was in the burkan's shadow; that was the price of the game, and he paid it. Within himself he thought, "My father Almambet once passed over from Kıtay to the Kirghiz; he walked toward the light, and I am descending into darkness. But without a descent into darkness, no dawn breaks."

Konurbay's heart of ice melted as though it had seen the sun.

— From this day forward you are my brother! he cried. Let Beecin hear it, let Kakançı hear it: a brother has come to me out of the unseen! The khanship of Sazañşañ and Bakburçun shall be yours. The golden throne is yours; the sword hammered sixty years upon the anvil is yours. I have my courser Algara — when he tosses his mane he cleaves the sunlight in two; he too is yours!

Messengers flew to Beecin, the feast was raised, the cauldrons boiled. Konurbay seemed to have grown young again with joy; he would not let the warrior he called brother out of his sight, and seated him at his knee at table. One night, when the drinks that stood in for

kumis had been drunk, the khan's tongue was loosened and he brought out the stone that lay on his heart.

— My brother, he said, you were raised among the Burut; you understand Semetey's tongue. Persuade him to peace; make him a friend to Kıtay. And what will I give in return? I will give the forty tribes of the Kıtay people. I will give the fairest of seven thousand maidens. Six thousand horses laden with gold I will pour out before him as the blood-price of Manas and Almambet. And if these are not enough, I will offer this head of mine, come now to its ninetieth year — only let this blood be stanched, only let the two peoples sit down without slaughtering one another.

A voice within Külçoro said, "You have named the blood-price with your own mouth, Kalça"; but his face smiled and his tongue was honeyed.

— My khan, my elder brother, he said, let this charge be mine. I will go to Semetey and soften his heart. With these hands of mine I will tie the knot of peace.

✦ ✦ ✦

On the Talas road, beyond a hidden snow pass, Külçoro knelt before his elder brother and told everything, one thing after another: the lie of Çılaba, his knee before the burkan, Konurbay's oath of brotherhood, the promised throne, Algara, the sixty-year sword, the forty tribes of people, the seven thousand maidens, the six thousand horses laden with gold...

— My elder brother, he said at last, if Konurbay is not taken by guile, he will not be toppled by forty years of war nor by Zulpukor. His fortress is of stone, his army is of the sea, his heart is of iron. But he has his pride; and pride is the rust of iron. I will feed that rust.

Semetey was silent a long while. He gazed at the embers in the hearth; he seemed to be searching for his father's face within the embers. At last he spoke, and his voice was both hard and old.

— Külçoro, my brother, my heart stands at the fork of two roads. One side of me says: go, finish this work. The other side says: it was thus that Konurbay brought down my father Manas — with spies, with a sweet tongue, with guile. The Kalça's table is honey, and at the bottom of the honey is poison. I give you six days' grace. If you have not returned by

the evening of the sixth day, I will pull Beecin down upon his head; I will not leave stone upon stone. And I have one word more — let it hang in your ear like an earring: do not lose yourself. You will be a khan there; the throne will come golden, the maiden will come fair; remember that your throne is the soil of Talas, and your fairest is the law of the Kirghiz.

— My oath upon it, my elder brother. Let the spirit of my father Almambet be my witness.

Semetey opened his hands; with the prayers he had learned from Bakay he blessed his çoro over and over, stroked his back, kissed his brow. Then with his own hands he made him ready: he led out the horse Buurul — "let my swift one run beneath you," he said; he held out Akkelte — "my father's breath is in its barrel," he said; he clothed him in Akolpok — "my mother Kanıkey's prayer is in its stitching," he said; he laid the charmed spear in his palm — "let the arm that felled Cezbilek fell the Kalça too," he said. Bakay Han was there as well; his white beard on his breast, his hands lifted to the sky.

— Külçoro, my foal, said the old man, I am Manas's elder kinsman; my brother's blood has lain in my bosom forty years like a stone. Melt that stone. Take our vengeance; and if you cannot take it, at least mark out a grave-place where we may be gathered together, and come back.

When Külçoro set out upon the road, all the Kirghiz wept behind him. The women looked out from the felt doorways and wiped their tears on their veils; the old men sank to the ground and opened their palms; the children, not knowing why, looked into the faces of their elders and were silent. From the breast of the grey yurts, together with the grey smoke, rose a muffled murmuring; it was not yet a lament, but it was the shadow of a lament. Semetey did not stir from his place until his çoro's dark shape had melted into the horizon; he looked at the prints of Buurul's hooves. "These tracks will return," he said to himself; "and if they do not, I will tear up that road stone by stone and pave it to Beecin." They were sending one man into the midst of teeming Kıtay, into the wolf's mouth; and that one man was carrying all their hearts away with him.

Yet Beecin received that one man as it receives the great. Konurbay raised all Kakançı to its feet.

— My brother has come from among the Kirghiz! he had his messengers cry. Set the wedding, pour out the feast!

The cauldrons were set, the camels were slaughtered, the squares were spread with silk; guests came from forty days' journey, and gifts came down from the Kakan's palace. For three days and three nights the drums scarcely fell silent; through the streets of Beecin drifted the smell of fat, the smoke of incense, and the name of a new khan. The lineage-provers of Kıtay came, the readers of bones, the readers of faces; they looked into Külçoro's palm, they felt his brow, they watched his walk, they passed their hands over his shoulder blade in search of the vein of his descent. At last they nodded their heads:

— This warrior is of khan's stock; his blood is pure, his bone is noble.

They did not lie; without knowing it, they spoke the truth. The son of Almambet was indeed a khan's grandson. The great ones of Kıtay lifted him up and seated him on the white felt, and raised him khan over Beecin. Sitting upon the golden throne, Külçoro closed his eyes for a moment; he heard the wind of Talas; he opened them and saw the multitude bowing before him. "Do not lose yourself," his elder brother had said. He did not lose himself; he took the throne for a stair, set his foot upon it, and looked not upward but ahead.

He built his standing stone by stone, and then made those stones into a bridge. One day, when he was alone with Konurbay, he opened the matter with a humble heart.

— My khan, my elder brother, he said, I went to Semetey and softened his tongue; but the Burut is a doubting people, and will not believe a word without a witness. A token of peace is needed. Send him your burkan, that he may know your intent is white. Prepare the blood-price of Manas; load the gold and the silver on mules. And at Karkıra, midway between the two peoples, convene an assembly of peace. You from one side, he from the other; let the two peoples meet eye to eye, let the swords stay in their sheaths, let the blood-price be presented, let the oath be sworn. After that neither will the Burut loose an arrow at you, nor Kıtay at him.

Konurbay's heart now inclined to every word of the man he called brother. He had his burkan wrapped and swathed and sent; the mules were strung in line, the chests of gold were bound, and messengers ran to both sides.

When the news reached Talas, Bakay Han came to Semetey's pavilion; forty years his road-companion, forty years in mourning. He did not kneel — his knees would scarcely bend now — but his voice was as though it knelt.

— My foal, he said, I carried Manas's coffin on my shoulder; I saw Kanıkey tearing her hair; I saw the light go out of Mother Çıyırdı's eyes. Before this old body enters the earth, let it see the Kalça brought down; I have no other wish left of heaven. I too will come to Karkıra; if I do not see it with my own eyes, with what face shall I go to my brother in the other world?

Semetey took the old man's hand and laid it against his own forehead.

— You shall see it, my father, he said. This winter has an end; this mourning too shall have one.

That autumn the country around Karkıra filled with the tents of two peoples: on one side the legions of Kıtay, on the other the tribes of the Kirghiz; between them, a slender hope of peace, and beneath that hope a whetted sword. From Keñ-Kol to the skirts of Ala-Too the yurts were pitched; the horses of the two armies drank from the same river, and the smoke of the two armies mingled in the same sky. The earth seemed to have made itself ready for peace; only the hearts of men each carried their own secret.

✦ ✦ ✦

Konurbay had his forty diviners; forty soothsayers, forty readers of stars. On the night before the setting-out, all forty crowded into the khan's pavilion, and all forty fell to the ground.

— My khan, do not go! they said. Our divination has come out black; your star has fallen. This peace is a trap with honey smeared on its mouth. That one you call brother is not of your blood; he is your blood's claimant.

Konurbay flew into a fury; he sprang from his throne and advanced upon the soothsayers.

— You are working enmity against my kinsman! he thundered. For forty years whatever you foretold, the opposite came to pass; and now you would smear black upon my bright-eyed brother. Out of my pavilion! Let me never see your faces again.

The forty diviners glided out like forty shadows; as they went, one of them, the eldest, paused on the threshold of the door and spoke without turning:

— My khan, we go; but fate goes faster than we.

The next day Konurbay ordered the peace procession. The mules laden with gold and silver were put in front; the chests of the blood-price were sealed. And the khan, saying that by custom one comes before peace unarmed and on foot, dismounted from his Algara. That Algara who in forty battles had never let an arrow pass over his back to his master; as the khan handed the halter to his groom, the horse grew restive, pawed the earth, and screamed. The beast knew what we did not. Konurbay struck the courser's neck one last time, and walked.

When they came to Kapka-Taş, in that narrow defile between two crags, the khan's step suddenly grew heavy. The wind was passing between the rocks in the mode of a lament; the day had tipped toward the west, and the shadows had grown long. Why, none can say — perhaps the word of the forty diviners had worked into him, perhaps the old heart had scented its own end, perhaps his knees, bereft of Algara, whispered him the truth — he stopped, leaned against the stone, and fixed his eyes in the direction of Beecin. Those beside him saw him weep that day for the first time.

— I have been deceived by a boy, he said in a low voice. I was taken in by a sweet tongue and a well-made frame, and I have come to my death on my own feet. O Kakan, let them carry my word to you: Konurbay son of Alööke was brought down not by the sword but by the tongue. After me let them keep the gates of Beecin fast; let them guard not against the Burut's arrow but against his smile. My army I commend to its mother's lap, my people to their law. Let them dig my grave beside the road, that all who come and go may see the end of pride.

He spoke his testament long; he spoke it, but he did not turn back. He could not turn back; pride marches a man in front of it even as it leads him to his death. He straightened, smoothed his kaftan, came out of the defile, and went down into the plain.

The plain of Karkıra that day was misted with the breath of two peoples. On one side Semetey, on his white-grey horse, like stone; behind him Bakay, forty years of mourning scored line by line into his face; beyond, the multitude of Kıtay, their standards, their drums. In the middle, Külçoro: mounted on Buurul, Akolpok on his back, Akkelte at his saddle, the charmed spear under his hand, Zulpukor at his waist. Kıtay believed him its own khan; the Kirghiz knew him for their own heart. The emptiness between the two armies was like a drawn bowstring; even the birds, it seemed, would not cross over it. Prayers were passing through Semetey; Bakay's lips, soundless, were counting the names of the fathers. All were watching the peace; only three men knew what was coming.

Konurbay, before the mules, on foot, walked slowly toward Semetey. The golden chests were opened; the daylight broke upon the blood-price. Ezkara advanced at his khan's side; the forty dignitaries in their ornamented kaftans were ranged to left and right. The prayer of peace was to be read, the oath was to be sworn.

The hour was full.

Külçoro moved like the cracking of lightning. Buurul sprang forward; Zulpukor left the sheath, the sun flashed once — and Ezkara's head, the word still in its mouth, fell to the earth. Before the multitude could draw breath the sword turned a second time; Konurbay, taking the steel at the nape of his neck, pitched forward like a great felled tree. The khan of Keçil, the son of Alööke, the accomplice of Manas's killer, ninety years of pride, was stretched face-down upon the soil of Karkıra. The forty dignitaries moved to clutch at sword and spear; Külçoro drove Buurul over them and broke all forty; forty kaftans withered in forty places.

The legions of Kıtay heaved once like a body left without its head, and came apart; some fled, some knelt, some stood turned to stone, staring. The sword of the man they had believed their khan had come down upon their own khan's neck; the mind could not take that in at one breath. No one loosed an arrow, no one gave an order; the mouth that would have given the order had fallen to the earth.

Semetey came at full gallop; he leapt to the ground and stood over Konurbay's fallen body. He looked long; there was no joy in his face, and no smile. This was the moment when a debt of forty years was closed; at such moments a man does not laugh — a man grows still.

— Külçoro, he said at last, and his voice was wide and desolate as the steppe, my father Manas's blood dried up in this man's guile. The sighs of father Almambet, of Çubak, of Sırgak stopped at his threshold. Give me one spoonful of his blood; such is the law. Before the spirits of my fathers, let me drink the last drop of the blood-price, that this suit may be closed.

Külçoro held out a spoonful of blood to his elder brother. Semetey raised the spoon to the sky; he held it toward Ala-Too, toward Talas, toward the direction of the hidden tomb.

— My father Manas, he said, behold me. Your blood has not been left upon the earth. My mother Kanıkey, hear me; the armour you sewed was torn, but the heart you sewed was

not. Bakay, my father, let your white beard be wet with tears no more; the stone in your bosom melted today.

Bakay Han sank to his knees where he stood; for the first time in forty years he wept like a child, sob upon sob. His weeping was no longer mourning; it was mourning laid at last into the earth. The old man took a handful of soil into his palm and pressed it to his breast. — Manas, my brother, he said, if you have heard my voice, sleep in peace now. The foals of your own mare have taken your enemy's head.

That evening fires were lit at Karkıra. The Kirghiz tribes boiled meat cauldron upon cauldron, kumis was poured, the bards found their tongues. The names of the two warriors — Semetey and Külçoro — were spoken with one mouth, like one breath: two heads, one heart; one heart, two arms... The old people said, "The hearth of Manas smokes again"; they said, "Almambet has risen again in his son."

Only one man stood a little back from the light of the fires, in the shadow. It was Kançoro; he too was a çoro, he too was a man of this campaign; but tonight his name had passed through no song. His eyes were fixed on the two warriors standing shoulder to shoulder in the middle of the field, and in those eyes something else was burning besides the reflection of the fire — a thing harder to quench than fire, more stealthy in its spreading than smoke. No one saw it; the festival let no one look.

At midnight Semetey came out before his pavilion and looked at the stars. After fifteen days of darkness the sky had never been so clear. Tomorrow the spoils would be divided, the fate of the captives would be decided, and then the host, like a bridegroom going to his beloved, would turn its face to Talas. Ayçürök's face rose before his eyes; he saw the hands his mother Kanıkey would lift when this news reached her. "The greatest enemy has fallen," he thought within himself; "my father's vengeance is taken; now there is the return to Talas, the feast, the quiet." The steppe night was mild, the wind was soft. But far off, toward Keñ-Kol, a wolf howled; once, twice, three times. Semetey shuddered and did not know why. The man who stands on the highest summit of victory cannot know that he stands also nearest to the precipice; fate knew it, and fate, that night, was looking out of Kançoro's eyes as they glittered in the shadow.

CHAPTER 30

The Triumph of Two Heads and the Dark Fate

— ❖ —

The dawn of victory fell upon the plain of Karkıra with a light the colour of blood. The embers of the fires that had burned all night had not yet cooled, and among the broken spears and toppled standards the wounded horses had bent their heads to the grass. A heavy smoke lay over the plain; beneath the smoke were the dead, and upon the dead the first crows. Far off, the remaining tents of the Hıtay encampment stood huddled in the morning frost; those who could not flee were bound, those who had fled were beyond the mountains, and those who waited stood on the threshold of mourning. Semetey stood before his tent, watching the rising day; in his face was neither joy nor weariness — only that deep, stone-like silence that had come down to him from his father. The war cries of the night before still rang in his ears; but the first thing a morning of victory teaches a man is that joy weighs as heavy as weariness. Then he turned, walked into the midst of the army, and spoke in his great voice so that every çoro should hear:

— Külçoro! Last night your sword walked before me, your shield guarded my head. Valour shall not go unrewarded. From this day the Argın people are your people; Cılgınduu is yours, Keñ-Kol is yours, and the pasture, the water, the hunting grounds of broad Talas — let them be yours. Eat, give drink, pitch camp and strike it — live like a khan!

Külçoro dismounted, set his knee to the ground, and with both hands kissed the hem of Semetey's garment. Cries of joy spread from one end of the army to the other; the old çoros nodded their heads, saying, "The law of Manas lives," and the young men beat their swords against their shields. Only one pair of eyes, in the shadow of the crowd, watched this bestowal from behind narrowed lashes, and darkened. Kançoro too had fought in that same battle that night, swallowed the same dust, shed the same blood; but when the rewards were counted, his name was not spoken even in the second mouth. He counted within himself: the Argın people — to Külçoro; Cılgınduu — to Külçoro; Keñ-Kol — to Külçoro. What remained to him was to stand at the edge of the applause. That morning an ember fell into Kançoro's heart, and no one saw it; the ember looked like ash, but it had not gone out.

The captives were brought. At their head, his hands bound with straps, his head held high even so, walked Kalça Konurbay. The wound on his face had crusted over, and in his eyes the light of the old fox had not yet gone out. When he came before Semetey he did not kneel; sweetening his voice like honey, he began to speak:

— O lion of Manas, O new sun of the steppe! Your sword is sharp, your fortune is open. What do you gain by killing me? One head, one handful of blood. Leave me alive — and the gates of Beecin shall open to you, the Kakan's treasury shall be poured out at your feet. I will give you the khanship of the six-gated horde; chests full of yambı, caravans laden with silk shall be yours. Let us make peace; let spring come between the two nations.

The words were fair; the lacquer on the words was of gold. Some of the çoros looked at one another, and the eyes of some caught upon the word treasure. But in that moment Bakay, his white beard spilling down his breast, sprang forward; his old body was trembling, and his voice roared like a boulder breaking loose from a mountain:

— Semetey! Give your ear to me, do not give your eye to this serpent! I know this Kalça — six times he deceived your father, six times he swore an oath, six times he trampled his oath! He spoke of peace and laid an ambush; he spoke of brotherhood and mixed in poison. Almambet's blood is on his neck, Çubak's blood is on his neck, and great Manas's

death is in his hand! One does not give milk to the serpent's young; give it, and it stings the one who fed it. Pardon him today, and you will weep tomorrow!

Before Semetey's eyes passed the face of the father he had never seen — never seen, yet carried in his blood. He did not stir, he did not speak; then in one stride he seized Konurbay by the collar. Once he lifted him and dashed him to the ground — the earth groaned. Twice he lifted him and dashed him down — blood came from the Kalça's mouth. Three times he lifted him, and at the third the stone of the steppe cracked. Then Zülfikâr flashed once, the moon-axe fell once; and the head that had deceived Manas six times was parted from its body before it could find time for a seventh guile.

That head they set up, side by side with Ezkara's head, at Kara-Saz in the bosom of the Karkıra plain. Two stakes, two heads; whenever the wind blew, the thin beards of both streamed the same way. Those who came saw it, those who passed saw it; and from that day the name of that place remained, in the people's tongue, İki Baş — the Two Heads. Winter's snow covered it, summer's grass overgrew it; the name was not erased.

But the severed head proved not the end of the war, only the seed of a new one. From the Hıtay encampment rose the moan of mourning; forty caysañ drove their swords into the earth before the black tent and swore the oath of death: vengeance or the grave. And at the far end of the plain, Algara, left masterless — Konurbay's black-maned, dark bay tulpar — screamed and reared, tore his rein loose, and flew eastward, toward the sands. Külçoro did not pause for even a moment; he lay down along Buurul's back and went after him like a bird.

Forty days he pursued him. The sand of the Kara-Kum was live coals by day and ice by night; forty days and forty nights, horse raced against horse, breath against breath. Algara flew in front, Buurul streamed after; when no water was found they drank from the waterskin, when no grass was found they licked the stones. By day the mirage led them, by night the stars; the dunes came and went like waves, and no track remained on that plain but the tracks of two horses. Some nights Külçoro slept in the saddle, some nights he did not sleep at all; waking, he thought of Bakay, and when he began to drowse he saw in his dream the forty çoros of Manas — all drawn up in a rank upon the sand, silent, watching him. On the morning of the fortieth day, at sunrise, Buurul's nose touched Algara's tail; before noon they were neck to neck; before the late afternoon Külçoro leaned down and took the black mane into his palm. Algara shook himself once more and strove to break free; then the noble beast understood that he was beaten; he bowed his head and matched

his gait to Buurul's gait. When they returned, the ribs of both horses could be counted, but both were alive.

Külçoro adorned Algara, mounted his halter with silver, and when he reached the army led him straight before Bakay:

— Father, he said, companion of Manas, father of wisdom to us all! This horse was your enemy's; now he is yours. May you cross mountains on his back, may you ford rivers.

Old Bakay's eyes filled with tears; he opened his hands and lifted his palms to the sky:

— Long be your life, my Külçoro! May the horse you ride never stumble, may the sword you gird never dull! May your way be white and your road open; may your line walk behind you and your fortune before you! May God make you such that no arrow strikes you and no word pierces you!

Those who heard that blessing would say afterward: that day an invisible armour was laid upon Külçoro's back; and well that it was, for the black days were not far off.

Then came the day of the great onslaught. The oath of the forty caysañ had not proved empty; the Hıtay army spread like locusts, the earth could not carry it. Their drums were beaten like thunder, their standards were planted like a forest. Semetey took the centre, Külçoro moved to the right wing, Kançoro to the left; three columns flowed like three floods. All day it was sword upon sword, spear upon spear; dust covered the sky, war cries split the earth; at noon the sun hung in the heavens like a red tangle of wool in the dust. Where Semetey passed, the ranks opened; where Külçoro wheeled, a standard came down; and Kançoro too fought to the death that day — the ember within him was one thing, his sword as yet another. Before evening fell the Hıtay line broke and the rout began; they drove the fleeing as far as Beecin, as far as the Kakan's boundary stone. And one morning a procession under white banners appeared before the camp: the envoy Ay-Cancun had come, standing to sue for peace.

It was Bakay who laid the table of peace, Bakay who conducted the parley. Ay-Cancun bowed to the very ground, the hem of his silk kaftan touching the dust; Bakay neither abased him nor exalted him — he treated the guest as a guest and spoke to the foe as a foe. The tribute was counted: string upon string of camel-loads of gold, chest upon chest of silver, handful upon handful of jewels; silks, otter furs, and the most excellent maidens of the Hıtay land. When the young warriors pressed to the gates of Beecin demanding plunder, Bakay raised his hand:

— Plundered goods do not prosper, he said; the smoke of plunder drifts for seven generations. What we have taken is enough; let the rest remain. The eye that is not filled is filled at last with grave-earth.

They turned home. The trains of spoils flowed through the passes for days; when they entered Talas the drums were beaten and the kerney sounded; the grey yurts were raised, the cauldrons hung, the race-horses run, the strongmen locked in wrestling. Day became kumis and night became song and maidens; forty days the feast lasted, forty nights the revels. The bards praised Semetey; some, carried away, said, "greater even than his father," and the old people shook their heads but did not gainsay it — the dead must have reverence, and the living must have hearts. Semetey sat in the white horde of Talas with a sultan's bearing; Ayçürök at his side, Kanıkey white-haired in the seat of honour, Bakay at his right hand. For the first time in long ages the steppe drew a wide breath. The child who had grown up an orphan sat on his father's throne; the heads of his enemies were on stakes, and the heads of his friends were held high. Many were they who said, "From now on, all is spring"; few were they who knew the calendar of fate.

Yet fate was looking on over the foam of the kumis, and laughing. Far away, in the Kazakh land, a warrior was blowing upon the ember in his heart as though he had kept it hidden forty years: Ümötöy, son of Kökçö. His father had never returned from the Beecin campaign; the son had poured the pain of growing up fatherless into the word blood-price, and little by little was gathering an army. His mother Akerkeç clung to his two skirts:

— My son, do not go! It was not the Kirghiz who killed your Kökçö; it was black Hıtay that killed him; his blood was buried in one pit with Almambet's and Çubak's. Kanıkey is my sworn sister, Semetey is your own kin. Do not go — have pity on my hearth!

Ümötöy did not listen. He wiped away his mother's tears with the butt of his whip and turned his horse's head toward Talas. Dust rose behind him; and within the dust there walked, unseen by any, a black writing of doom.

✦ ✦ ✦

The Kazakh army crossed the Ala-Too; it cut through the snow at Çabdar Pass, came down muddying the waters of Keñ-Özön, and one mid-morning massed like a black cloud on the plain before Talas. The herdsmen drove the flocks into the inner valleys, the

watchers lit fires from hill to hill. That day there was a wedding in Talas: Külçoro had taken Akbala, daughter of Camgırçı, and the spaces between the grey yurts were full of games, races, laughter; meat in the cauldrons, kumis in the drinking-horns, silver trinkets chiming in the braids of the girls. When the news came, Külçoro had a bowl of kumis in his hand; he did not set it aside — he drained it, then put it down, and called out:

— Bring out Surkoen!

Before the henna had dried on the bride Akbala's hands, the bridegroom buckled on his armour. Akbala stood in the doorway and said nothing; only she bound her husband's sash with her own hands — that is the farewell speech of a Kirghiz woman; words are not needed. Külçoro, on Surkoen's back, went out alone to face the army; he stretched his voice from one end of the plain to the other:

— Who are you, O guest? He who comes unbidden goes without a table! If you have come for peace, our door is open; if you have come for war, our sword is sharp. Speak your name!

From the other side a warrior came out; tall of stature, his brow knotted, his voice thick with rage:

— I am Ümötöy, son of Kökçö! I have come to take my father's blood. I demand the blood-price: I demand Buurul from under Semetey, and the head of that old wolf Bakay! Refuse, and I will put Talas to the torch from its grass to its reeds, and scatter its ashes on the Keñ-Özön!

Külçoro's brows rose; then his voice softened, and he spoke as one speaks to a kinsman:

— Ümötöy, my brother! You are no stranger to us, and we are no strangers to you. It was not the Kirghiz who struck down your father; Kökçö fell a martyr at the enemy's hand, on the black campaign of Beecin, in the very place where Almambet and Çubak fell. His blood is not on us but on Hıtay — and that blood Semetey has already taken; Konurbay's head stands on a stake at Kara-Saz! Come, dismount; let us go to our mother Kanıkey, and let her count out to you, one by one, the kinship of the two peoples. Be a guest, be a brother; ask not for blood, ask for bread.

— I want no words, I want blood! roared Ümötöy. Buurul, and Bakay's head! Before three days are out, I will take them!

Külçoro turned his horse's head. Two burdens lay within him: one the burden of war, the other, heavier still — the sin of killing a guest, and a kinsman at that. He returned to the horde, and the council was gathered. Bakay stroked his beard and spoke gravely:

— Goods are the parings of the soul, but the soul is no paring of goods. Give herds from the horse-droves, give yambı from the chests; ward this off with wealth, not with blood. Kazakh and Kirghiz are two arms of a single body.

Kanıkey took up the word; her stately face that day was drawn with foreboding:

— Hear me, she said. Karahan had twelve daughters; the twelve went as brides to twelve peoples, and founded the hearths of twelve peoples. One of them is Çıyırdı — the mother of Manas; one is Akerkeç — the mother of Ümötöy. We are the grandchildren of two arms sprung from one womb; to shed this blood is to cut one's own vein. And know this: the curse of Akerkeç is a dire curse; what leaves her mouth does not fall to the ground — it touches the sky and comes back. If that mother curses, stone itself cannot endure it. I beg you, make peace!

Semetey listened; he listened, but he did not hear. Youth was in his veins, victory upon his head, pride in his throat. For the hand that had cut off Konurbay's head and brought Beecin to its knees to endure a tongue that said "give up your horse, give up your elder" — this was no burden his nature could carry. He thought within himself: to ask for Buurul is to ask for my wing; to ask for Bakay's head is to gouge out my eye. He who asks for this has not asked for peace. Letting no one perceive it, he drew Külçoro aside and commanded him in a low voice:

— Go, speak one last time. Let him ask treasure — it shall be given; let him ask herds — they shall be given; let him ask Talas — I will give it; let him ask my khanship — I will take off my crown and give it. But if Buurul and Bakay's head come into his mouth again... then either his corpse stays on the plain or he comes before me in bonds. I will hear of nothing else.

Külçoro went once more and threw open the door of generosity to its widest. Ümötöy's answer was the spear: he thrust once, he thrust twice — however many times he thrust, the point slid from Külçoro's armour and never reached his flesh: Bakay's blessing, it seemed, stood between the iron and the skin. Külçoro bore it, and bore it; then from the army sounded the horn of general attack, and the cord of patience snapped. Külçoro rose in his stirrups and gave all the wind of his lungs to a single name:

— Manas!.. Manas!..

That war cry rolled across the plain like thunder; the Kazakh horses shied and reared, the ranks heaved. Külçoro went in at one side and came out at the other; every standard before him toppled, every arm that opposed him broke. When the rout began, he lifted up with his own hand the folk who slid from their horses and fell to the ground crying "mercy!", and withheld his sword from them:

— No sword against the people! The guilt belongs to him who was stubborn.

Then he overtook the fleeing Ümötöy; he hooked the barb of his spear into his sash, plucked him from his horse with one heave, bound him arm and wing, hauled him across Kulaker's crupper, and brought him before Semetey's white horde, and set him down:

— Here, he said, is what you commanded: not his corpse, but his bound body.

The ground before the horde was crowded. Sarı Han was there, Bakay was there, Kanıkey watched from behind the curtain; and on every tongue the same word waited: pardon. Ümötöy stood upright with his bound hands; he was trembling not with fear but with rage. Semetey rose slowly from his throne and looked at him long. Then — before anyone could shape a word, before Bakay could open his mouth, before Kanıkey could part the curtain — he bit his lip and blinked once toward his executioner.

The executioner knew that sign; when the command comes by the eye, the hand moves faster than the word. The sword rose; the daylight played for an instant along its edge.

The sword fell.

Tongues that a breath before had been readying themselves to plead were, a breath later, frozen. The thing was done; the blood had run to the very edge of the white felt. Sarı Han turned his head away, Bakay shut his eyes; Kanıkey let the curtain fall and covered her face with both hands. Then her lament rose — not the lament of a khan's consort, but of a mother, of a sister:

— Alas, Ümötöy, alas, child! Akerkeç's only one, Kökçö's single branch! What shall I say now to my sworn sister; what will that mother say to heaven when this news reaches her? The curse of Akerkeç is a dire curse; fire comes from her mouth, and what it touches it withers! Semetey, my son, you have not merely cut off a head today — you have taken the axe to the pillar of your own sky!

Semetey did not answer; his rage had ebbed, and in its place had settled a coldness that has no name. Bakay struck his old hands upon his knees and rose:

— What is done is done, he said; now let us at least give reverence to the dead and to his line. Let the blood-price go out from us: let the wealth be counted, let the loads be bound. Wash the body with zemzem water, wrap it in the heaviest silks; let the son of Kökçö be sent on his way like the son of a khan.

So it was done. In a silence heavy as though it rose from the depths of the earth, Ümötöy's body was washed with zemzem water and wrapped fold upon fold in white silk; at its head stood Kanıkey, smoothing the edge of the shroud with her own hands — as though she were sending off a son of her own body. The blood-price was counted: drove upon drove from the horse-herds, flock upon flock, yambı from the chests. Over all was laid the most precious of the Beecin spoils left from Manas — a carpet worked with gold thread, beyond any price. And then someone — what fool counselled it, what ill-omened tongue spoke it, no one afterward would own — gave order that the bier be loaded upon the tulpar: upon Taybuurul, the horse Semetey held dearer than his own soul.

✦ ✦ ✦

When Külçoro saw this, his face turned the colour of ash. He ran, seized Buurul's halter; then his hands fell loose, and beating his head with his two fists he raised the lament:

— Woe upon my head, my black head! Buurul passing from our hands — that is your own death arriving, my Semetey! The horse goes, the fortune goes; the fortune goes, the head goes! He who sent this horse away to the Kazakh has sent you away to the grave! Alas Talas, alas grey yurts — your pillar has shifted from its footing and you did not feel it!

Some laughed: "he is young, he is jealous over a horse," they said; some shuddered and fell silent. Semetey heard, and made as though he had not; the coldness within him had wrapped itself now around his ears as well. The funeral train drew slowly away; at its head went Taybuurul with his silk-wrapped burden, the gold-embroidered carpet flashing and dying in the sun — his head bowed low, as though he knew what load he carried and that from the road he travelled there was no returning. The sound of his hooves melted away beyond the Keń-Özön; in Talas that evening no one sang.

In the Kazakh land, Akerkeç, receiving her son's silk-wrapped burden, first embraced it, then breathed in its scent, then straightened. She did not weep. She fixed her eyes, long past weeping, in the direction of Talas, and opened her two palms to the sky:

— Semetey! You who slaughter your guest in his bonds, you who pour out a kinsman's blood like the blood of a feast-beast! May you see no more days, may you see no autumn; may you fall face-first from the horse of fortune you ride; may the warrior on whom you lean your back dig your pit; may you sit orphaned at your own hearth! My cry will not lie upon the ground — it will climb to heaven, and turn, and find you!

Those around her drew back in fear; a mother's curse is sharper than the sword and more numerous than an army — on the steppe a child of seven knows this. Then that broken mother turned her grief into work with a mind cold as ice. She had Taybuurul brought; even in a stranger's hands the tulpar stood noble, his mane still searching for the wind. Akerkeç looked at him long: this horse had carried her son's corpse; this horse was Semetey's wing. The wing must be broken. She had molten lead poured into his ear — that ear which could hear the war-horn at three days' distance; she had fine needles thrust into the joints of his legs — those legs which had swallowed the Kara-Kum in forty days. In one night the horse was ruined; the mane moulded, the eye went out. Then she had him sold to Sart caravan-men for rags and tatters: and Semetey's fortune, lame and deaf, fell in behind a caravan on the sandy roads.

Nor did Akerkeç stop there; she put the bow of vengeance into another's hand. To the Cediger land, to the khan's horde, letter flew upon letter: "O Kıyaz! Shall your elder brother Toltoy's blood lie on the ground? Semetey who struck him down laughs now on his throne, and Ayçürök sleeps in his bosom. If you are a man, rise; take your blood, take your beloved!" When Kıyaz heard his brother's name he gripped the hilt of his sword; when he heard Ayçürök's name his eyes went dark.

And in those very days one more letter reached Kıyaz — this one came not from without but from within; from inside the sleeve, from a hidden hand. The writer was Kançoro. The ember he had nursed since the day Surkoen was given to Külçoro had at last become flame: "They gave the Argın to him, they gave the horse to him, they gave the blessing to him; what is left to me is his table. Let autumn come; bring an army — I will open the gate from within. Semetey's strength is a secret in my keeping — when the hour comes I will deliver that secret to you." The letter went; and treachery, like an autumn fruit, hung swaying on its branch, waiting to ripen.

The white-bearded elders of the Cediger — old Tölöbay and Kadırbay — went down on their knees before Kıyaz:

— My khan, do not go! Kıdır's hand has touched Semetey; the forty çiltens are his companions; the sword does not bite him, the arrow does not pierce him. Do not go seeking your own death!

Kıyaz did not listen. Toltoy's name was on one side of him, the vision of Ayçürök on the other, and the letter in his bosom lay over his heart:

— Touched or not, so be it, he said; I too carry a letter in my bosom — if not from Kıdır, then from him who opens the gate. And have you not heard: they say Buurul is gone from their hands, they say the çiltens have turned away. When the lion's claw has been drawn, even the jackal moves in upon him. Rise; let the army be gathered!

The drum of the Cediger was beaten; from one end of the land to the other the horsemen were mustered, and the earth shook.

✦ ✦ ✦

In Talas, autumn walked silently among the yellowing poplars. The flocks were coming down to the winter pastures, the felts of the grey yurts were being drawn tight, the river water was thinning. That autumn Semetey found himself strangely alone: since Buurul had gone, no horse had settled his heart, no hunt had yielded its savour. At night he listened to Ayçürök's breathing, bent his ear to the life within her, and still could not fill the emptiness inside him. Kançoro saw that emptiness; treachery is like water seeking a breach — it found one. One morning, putting on a face of concern, he bowed before Semetey:

— My khan, he said, for three nights a dream has been strangling me. I see your father Manas: he stands at the door of the white tomb, his brows knotted, his voice like thunder: "My son has forgotten me; my sacrifice has not been slaughtered, my cauldron has not boiled. Let him come and offer his vow; if he does not come, I cut off my blessing," he says. I wake drenched in sweat. Go to the tomb, my khan; offer your vow, quiet your father's spirit.

In Semetey's heart his father's name was ever an open wound; through that wound he believed the dream's lie. He ordered the preparations: ninety grey mares were set apart for the offering, and the blessed bronze cauldron was loaded. But on the morning he was to set out, Ayçürök, great with child — daughter of the white swan, the shadow of sleeplessness in her eyes — ran and clung to his horse's rein:

— Do not go, Semetey! For ten nights I have seen dream upon dream, and every one ill-omened: I saw Zülfikâr broken — in two pieces, the hilt in your hand, the blade in a stranger's land; I saw Akkelte shattered — your father's hearth-gun, bursting apart crack upon crack; and I saw Akolpok, that blessed armour-coat, on a back — but not on your back: on Kançoro's back! For forty days my bird has not sung, my hearth has not drawn. This road is no road, this dream is no dream, this summons is a summons of death! Do not go; if you go, you leave me a widow and the child in my womb an orphan!

Within Semetey there still lay that coldness left over from the day of Ümötöy; and now his pride mounted upon it. He raised the whip — and brought it down. The whip touched the shoulder of the white swan's daughter; once, and once again. Ayçürök let go of the rein; she drew back and back; and then from the mouth of that stately, that patient woman there spilled a word that overflowed her own will:

— Go then... and from where you go, may you never return!

The word left her mouth, and it did not lie on the ground. In that instant — eyes that saw it swore to it — the dark stream beside the horde shrank in its bed and ran dry; and beyond, the black rock the size of a tent split down its middle with a crack. Ayçürök clapped both hands over her mouth; but the arrow had left the bow, the curse had left the tongue, once and for all. Semetey did not turn to look; he rode on.

They came to the white tomb — that blessed building Kanıkey had raised in secret, its outer face a lie and its inner face a mystery. Semetey pressed his face to the threshold, offered his vow, and waited for a sign from his father: a voice, a stirring of air, a face in a dream. As in his childhood in Bukhara, on the day he learned his lineage, he had said "I am Manas's son" with his heart pounding, so now with the same pounding he said, "Father, I am here." Nothing came. The stone of the tomb stood like stone, its wind blew like wind; the dead made no sound, and the living heard none. The ninety grey mares were sacrificed, the blessed bronze cauldron was set upon the hearth; wood was heaped, the fire was fanned to roaring — the cauldron did not boil. One day, two days... twelve days the fire burned, and for twelve days the face of the cauldron stayed cold as ice. On the evening of the twelfth day the cord inside Semetey snapped; he rose, snatched up the moon-axe, and struck the blessed cauldron of his fathers. The bronze gave one bitter cry like a bell and burst; the pieces were buried in the ash of the hearth. No one made a sound; only Külçoro shivered, as though in the sound of the breaking bronze he had heard another breaking.

At that very moment a rider came down from the ridge at full gallop: it was Kançoro the lookout, and in his voice was a strange trembling he could not hide:

— My khan! Kıyaz has come — the army of the Cediger is more than the earth can bear; the dust stands like a pillar to the sky, they are coming! My khan... if you will hear counsel, let us not be slaughtered: let us bring out gifts, spread the white felt, raise Kıyaz khan over Talas; save your name, save your life. There is no standing before the flood.

Külçoro shot from his place like an arrow; gripping the hilt of his sword he advanced upon Kançoro:

— Silence, hireling! he cried. The tongue that speaks this word has long been eating at the enemy's table! My khan, open your eyes: since Surkoen I have known this heart had blackened, though I would not cast it in his face. Here is the one who will open your gate from within — do you think it was for nothing you dreamed of Akolpok on his back!

Kançoro swore oaths and vowed vows; but his eye fled from Semetey's eye. And Semetey, in that moment, remembered a day long past: in Bukhara, when he had only just learned his lineage, a warning of his mother Kanıkey. That day the mother had bared her breast, and from her left breast had drawn forth black blood in place of milk, and had said: "See this blood, my son; this is the sign of the black day that will come upon you from within. Watch him who sits at your own table, him to whom you turn your back; the stranger's sword wounds, but your own kinsman's sword kills." That day his young mind had not grasped it; now, while the ash of the broken cauldron still smoked, he grasped it — but the hour was the hour of evening.

He looked about him. There was a strangeness in the air: the invisible wing-beats he had always heard about his shoulders — the sound of the forty çiltens — were gone. The blessing in his bosom, the luck in his palm, the white-bearded Kıdır who had walked in his dreams — none of them was there. Buurul was gone, the cauldron was broken, Akkelte had shattered in a dream, and Ayçürök's curse had dried the water. He was alone; perhaps for the first time since his birth, every cord between himself and heaven severed, utterly alone. The lone lion shook his head once.

— Saddle Artoru, he said; his voice was calm, and its calm was terrible. Bring me Zülfikâr.

Artoru was saddled; Zülfikâr — the sword that had broken in the dream — was girded at his waist. Semetey set his foot in the stirrup and paused a moment on the horse's back; he

looked at Talas, at the grey yurts, at the white horde, at the autumn sky over them all — he looked long, as though taking his farewell with his eyes. Then he turned his horse's head toward the black dust of the Cediger army that came crushing the earth. Behind him was Külçoro, beside him the autumn wind, and before him — woven of Akerkeç's cry, of Ayçürök's curse, of Kançoro's letter from within the sleeve — his black fate.

The dust was drawing nearer; within the dust were tens of thousands of hooves, and above the hooves the black standard of Kıyaz. And behind that dust, in a place no one yet saw, the seal of a letter written from within the sleeve was waiting for autumn's hour. Semetey struck in his heel; Artoru sprang forward.

CHAPTER 31

The Golden Crown of Betrayal and the Last Bed

— ❖ —

Dust rose from the seven valleys of Ceti-Özön; not dust but a black cloud, not a black cloud but the smoke of a blood feud. The Cediger people had fallen in behind Kıyaz, son of Bagış, and were marching on Talas, following the trail of the dark bay stallion called Tootoru. The discord sown by Çınkoco and Toltoy had come to ear after long years, and it was not the sickle but the spear that had been raised to reap that harvest. In Kıyaz's heart burned the fire of vengeance, and on his tongue lay an oath: Toltoy's blood would not go unanswered, and the honor of Cediger would be washed clean in the waters of Talas. Where the army's foot fell, the grass never straightened again; the springs it passed ran clouded for a week.

Talas heard them. Talas heard everything; the wind was its messenger, the eagle its sentinel. Among the gray yurts of Keñ-Kol the women paused at their felt-beating and

turned their heads to the east; the herdsmen drove the horse herds down into the ravines; the white-bearded elders stepped out onto their thresholds and studied the color of the sky. The snowy shoulders of the Ala-Too were silent as ever, but that silence was the silence before a storm. And that day no watchman was needed, for Külçoro had already mounted. The son of Almambet threw his white fur cloak over his shoulders, swung onto Akborçuk, clamped Sırnayza under his arm, and rode down alone into the plain. Alone, yes; but behind a warrior who rides alone go the spirit of Manas, the blood of Almambet, the prayer of Kanıkey. At the first clash he felled ten men, at the second he scattered a hundred, at the third the vanguard of Cediger broke, and the broken army tangled into itself like a flock of sheep. Külçoro's war cry ranged the valleys, returned, and ranged them again. Before evening fell, the elders of Cediger came with halters looped about their own necks; to wear the halter, in the tongue of the steppe, was to say "my neck is thinner than a hair" — it was to say "cut, or spare."

At their head walked an old man whose white beard spilled over his chest: Kadırbay, son of Kalça. He had slipped the halter over his neck with his own hand, and he walked upright, his knees unbowed.

— The fault is not the people's, said Kadırbay, his voice cracked but strong. The fault belongs to Kıyaz of the short wit; the fault belongs to Kançoro, who vomited sedition into our midst. The sheep does not follow the wolf, and the wolf makes no fold for the sheep; we were driven, and so we went. If you kill us, may our blood be lawful to you; if you spare us, may your bread be blessed.

At that moment Semetey came down from the ridge. When the son of Manas appeared, mounted on Nartoru with Akolpok upon his shoulders, a shudder passed through the ranks of Cediger; it was as though a mountain had walked out upon the steppe. Kıyaz saw him, and the instant he saw him the point of his spear dipped toward the earth. His hand would not lift against that majesty, nor his tongue, and least of all his heart. He signaled his army to withdraw; Cediger flowed back into the dust from which it had come.

And now it must be told — where this sedition was leavened, in what cauldron this hatred was boiled. For no treachery is born in a single night; treachery is dug like a well through long years, and then one day it opens beneath a man's own feet.

Kançoro's well had begun with the halter of Surkoyon. When Toltoy was routed and the spoils were being divided, Semetey had thrown the lead-rope of the courser Surkoyon

not to Kançoro but to Külçoro. A halter; a handful of leather, a span of iron. Perhaps Semetey threw it without a moment's thought; a lord's hand is sometimes quicker than his heart. But in a wounded heart a halter becomes a serpent — it coils, it squeezes, it poisons. That day Kançoro had smiled in the midst of the army, shouting with the rest to hail Külçoro; no one had seen the inside of his palm — and in his palm were four bloody crescents where his nails had sunk into the flesh. From that day forward Kançoro hid his teeth when he laughed and hid the dagger at his belt when he bowed. He stirred his hatred into his kımız and drank it, spread it on his bread and ate it, laid it beneath his pillow at night and slept on it. And when the day came, he cast three ropes up from the bottom of his well.

The first rope: the secret of Taybuurul. No bullet could pierce Semetey's charmed horse Taybuurul, no blade could bite him; he could be destroyed only by binding his four legs and pouring molten lead into his ear — and this secret was known to three or five souls on the face of the earth, and Kançoro was one of them. He gave the secret to the enemy. The second rope: the horse himself. One night Taybuurul was cut off from the herd, his four legs were bound, lead was poured into his ear; when the horizon paled, the noblest tulpar of the steppe lay cold. The third rope: the letter. Kançoro sent Kıyaz a gift of six horses and slipped a letter in among them; in the letter was written the day of battle — written on which day Semetey would be weak, on which day he would be alone. Three ropes, three betrayals; all three braided to be driven into the back of the brother with whom he had suckled at one breast.

That is why, as the Cediger army broke and fled before Külçoro, a single rider overtook it from behind. It was Kançoro; his horse's mouth was full of foam, his own mouth full of poison.

— Cediger! he bellowed. Cediger, ho! Shall Toltoy's blood lie unavenged on the ground? Were you born men, to run like women? With what face will you return to Ceti-Özön — will your wives let you through the door, will your children call you father? Turn back! Whoever does not turn, I will pour water on his hearth with my own hand!

On the steppe, shame is stronger than fear. The fleeing army halted, the halted army turned, the turned army formed its ranks. On some soldiers' faces doubt still lingered; on others a newly kindled spite; but every foot had now turned back onto the same road. And that day the first black banner of open war rippled over Talas.

Külçoro saw Kançoro turning the fugitives back, and at first he could not believe what he saw. They had suckled at one breast; Kanıkey had raised the two of them in one embrace, fed them meat from one dish, laid them to sleep beneath one blanket. Now that brother was roaring at the head of the enemy's army. Külçoro's eyes went dark, then opened; and when they opened, something inside him had died, and something of stone had settled in its place.

— I swear it, was all he said. By the spirit of my father Almambet I swear, I will not leave Kançoro's head upon those shoulders. The right of milk ended today; from this day there is only the right of the sword between us.

Old Kadırbay stepped between them once more; old men always step between, for those who stand near the grave know the smell of blood better than the young. He gathered the notables of Cediger and cried out:

— O Cediger! Forgetfulness and ingratitude are twin brothers, and both blind a man. Who brought Kançoro out of the Chinese dungeon? Semetey brought him. Who took vengeance for Han Çubak? Semetey took it. Who stood before Konurbay, who guarded the honor of the Kyrgyz? This man's father guarded it, and this man guarded it. Will you now trample that salt underfoot? The salt strikes back, O Cediger — the salt strikes back!

But Kançoro's tongue proved sharper than Kadırbay's. He spoke with threats, he spoke with promises, and most of all he spoke with fear: if Semetey lived, he said, he would tear out Cediger by the root, make slaves of its children and concubines of its women; and if he himself were khan, he swore, he would deal out peace to Ceti-Özön, shares of plunder, summer pastures from the grasslands of Talas. When fear and greed sit down together, reason is driven from the tent. Kıyaz first bowed his neck, then went down on his knees; the son of Bagış, in the midst of his own army, bent before Kançoro.

And Cediger raised a throne for the enemy's retainer. Sixty men took the gilded throne upon their shoulders; they set the golden crown on Kançoro's head, wrapped him in white felt, and lifted him toward the sky. Drums were beaten, kımız flowed like blood, and the flatterers shouted three times: khan, khan, khan! Kadırbay stood at the edge of that crowd, spat on the ground, and muttered in a voice no one heard: "The crown of Cediger on a Kyrgyz retainer... Its wearer will rot before its gold does." But his voice was lost among the drums; a true word is always defeated by the sound of drums. Kançoro looked down from the height of the throne; below him he saw a people applauding him, and in the distance a hearth he had sworn to destroy. He smiled. The crown of treachery was made of gold, but

where it touched his brow the skin was scorching; and not one of the sixty men bearing the throne saw it.

The first command of Kançoro the khan was war. He drove the whole army against Semetey, and as he drove it he whispered into the enemy's ear every weakness of Semetey: Taybuurul is no more, he said; the forty çilten guardians have turned their faces from him, he said; Akkelte will not fire, and Zülpükor rusts in its sheath. Everything holy has withdrawn from him; now he is a man of flesh and bone like yourselves, he said. To sell a man's sacred fortune in this way was the heaviest sin of the steppe; Kançoro sold that sin as a peddler sells butter in the market.

Cediger bore down. From four sides four spears drove into Semetey at once; four spears, like four serpent's fangs. The son of Manas swayed once upon Nartoru, straightened once, then shook himself — shook himself as a mountain shakes — and the four spears were flung to the four winds, and the hands that held them were left masterless. Külçoro came up; he came up, but by now his eyes had gone dark with fury. In the tumult, among those thrusting spears at Semetey, he saw Kadırbay and Tölöbay, son of Tölök; though the mouths that counseled peace had fallen silent, the hands that gripped spears had spoken. Sırnayza fell once, rose once; two white-bearded heads dropped to the earth like two white stones. Afterward Külçoro would think long upon those two heads; but that day, in the midst of battle, there was no room for thought — only room for blood.

Then black fate struck its first blow. To break the encirclement, Semetey drove Nartoru up a steep slope; the horse climbed three strides, at the fourth a stone slid, at the fifth his knees buckled. Nartoru stumbled and could not rise; the noble beast gathered all his strength and strove once more, and it was not enough — the weight of the battle he had carried all day had settled into his knees. Semetey dismounted, and where he dismounted he stood: a hero without a horse, a lone gray wolf. Had it been Taybuurul, he would have crossed that slope like a bird; but a night of treachery had long since swallowed Taybuurul, and the one man who knew it stood in the opposite ranks wearing a golden crown. The flood of Cediger swelled from four sides, and as it swelled it tightened. Külçoro was far off, fighting in a whirlpool of his own; between the two of them stood an army.

✦ ✦ ✦

Night came down between the two fires. On the Cediger side, Kıyaz sat in his tent gnawing his nails. What he had seen by day would not leave his eyes; he poured his fear out to Kançoro:

— You told me this man would be easy, Kançoro. He is not easy. I know his guardians; all Cediger knows them. At the head of his bed, they say, lies the black serpent Mar — its tail in one valley, its head in another. At his right hand prowls a gray tiger, its eyes redder than embers. Above him wheels the giant black eagle, its wing a cloud, its shadow the night. Against whom are we marching? Come, let us give this up; let us return to Ceti-Özön before the army is broken further.

Kançoro's face appeared and vanished in the light of the fire.

— Turn back? he said. I have turned back for thirty years, Kıyaz. At every wound I turned inward, turned back into my hatred. Listen and learn: when Toltoy was routed, the halter of Surkoyon was mine by right, and it was thrown to Külçoro. We returned from the Oogan campaign; a khanship had been promised, and it was not given — land fell to Külçoro, and to me a dry word of praise. We returned from Beecin; I asked for Konurbay's black horse, and that horse too was withheld from me. Not once was I set equal with Bakay; at the feast I was always seated below. Three hatreds, three mountains; I have lived beneath those mountains. Now the turn is mine. I swear it to you: six days. Within six days Semetey will die. His guardians? His fortune has fled him, I told you. The serpent sleeps, the tiger has gone far, the bird is in other skies. Six days, Kıyaz. Then Talas is yours, and the crown is mine.

That same night, on the Talas side, Külçoro knelt in his lord's tent. His voice was hoarse:

— My lord, years ago my mother Kanıkey spoke; I heard it with my ears, my mind did not grasp it, and now it has. "Kançoro's eye is on the throne," she said; "when his day comes, he will trample the right of salt." We laughed and let it pass. A mother's heart and a winter cloud are never wrong, they say; both know beforehand what they will let fall. Now hear me: put on this cloak that no arrow can pierce. My mother wove it; prayer is steeped into its every hair. And Nartoru is weary; mount Surkoyon, the horse taken from Toltoy. He is a swift runner; he will carry you through and out.

Semetey put on the cloak and mounted Surkoyon. But death had already set its omens in a row; the omens of death are like a caravan — when one appears, the rest come on behind.

The first omen was Akkelte. The blessed gun inherited from Manas — Akkelte, that had toppled armies before Beecin and brought down mountains with its voice — did not fire that morning. Semetey struck the flint — the spark fell, the powder was silent. He struck again — the powder was silent still. They pressed a live coal to the touch-hole; the coal went out as if pressed against ice. Akkelte was a weapon that had known its master's father; its silence was its speech. Semetey laid the gun across his knee and stroked the barrel as one strokes a child; he did not take offense, he only understood. The second omen was Surkoyon. The horse with the cropped ear and the Ogoy brand on his haunch — whether he remembered the scent of his old masters or the sting of an old whip, no one knows — drove his four hooves into the earth and would not take a step. Semetey touched him with his heel; he did not move. He showed him the whip; he did not move. He spoke gently to him; still he did not move. The enemy was coming on in a cloud of dust, and the horse had turned to stone.

— This is the way of my father Manas, said Semetey; in his voice there was neither anger nor pleading, only the sound of a door closing. On this road, a sulking horse is not carried.

Zülpükor flashed once. Surkoyon's head fell apart from his body. Semetey lowered the bloodied sword, and in that moment, in the middle of that wide steppe, between two armies, he stood on foot as the loneliest man upon the earth.

Then he did a thing that froze the blood of the enemy who beheld it. He did not run, did not seek cover, did not call for help. He unfastened his saddle, set it on the ground, and made it a pillow. He took Akolpok from his back and drew it over himself like a blanket. He turned his face toward the qibla, lay down, and slept. In the middle of a sea of enemies, in the shadow of spears, under the very nose of death — he slept. And his sleep was deep sleep; not even his eyelashes stirred, and his chest rose and fell like the chest of a child. Cediger watched from afar and could not approach; for fearlessness of that measure was counted more than human, and to raise a sword against it was to raise a sword against a mountain. The vanguard jostled one another and no one took the first step; "you go," said one, "you go," said the other, and neither went. The wind of the steppe stroked the sleeping man's hair; perhaps within that wind was the breath of Manas.

When he woke, the sun had climbed high, and at his head Külçoro was weeping. The weeping of warriors is silent; the shoulders shake, no sound comes. Semetey sat up, leaned against his saddle, and spoke; his speech was a testament, and both of them knew it.

— Do not weep, Külçoro; tears will be a curtain before the deeds you must see. Hear me. There will be seven more days of fighting; at the end of the seven days, whatever comes, the heads of Kıyaz and Kançoro must be taken — this is my first word. Ayçürök is three months with child; if she bears a son, let ninety head of stock be slaughtered, let the funeral feast be given, and let his name be Seytek — this is my second word. If I go, take Ayçürök yourself; let her not fall into a stranger's hands, let my hearth not be mingled with a stranger's hearth — this is my third word. Open the doors of my treasury; deal it out to the poor, the orphan, the fatherless; wealth does not enter the grave — this is my fourth word. And let the Kyrgyz not scatter from the valleys of Talas and Keñ-Kol; let them sit as one, sit in unity; let them post watchmen toward China and toward the Kalmuk, and never abandon the watch — this is my fifth word. Let my mother Kanıkey and my grandmother Çıyırdı do themselves no harm; tell them that one does not die after the dead — after the dead, one lives.

He fell silent; his gaze went far away, to the unseen roofs of Talas; then, for the first time, his voice cracked:

— I carry one wound, Külçoro, and it is not a sword wound. I never gave the funeral feast for my father Bakay. He guarded me in the cradle, raised me in exile; in my father's absence he was a father to me, in the darkness of my road he was a light. I remained in his debt — a cauldron of feast-meat, a lament. I would not have wished to carry that debt to the grave... It was not fated. Now my last command: there is Sarı Han, whom I brought out of Buhara and made khan over the Argın — the one they called Sarı Taz, the bald one, upon whose head I set a crown — let a letter reach him in haste. Let it say only, "Semetey is in his narrow day"; that is enough. His heart will tell him the rest.

The letter went; the swiftest rider took the shortest road. And that day, when Cediger was driven to the attack once more, the feet of the army went backward. A saying was passing among the soldiers: "We have eaten the salt of Manas; can a sword be raised against that salt? The salt will seize us — it will seize our wives and children." The ranks wavered, the spears drooped. At that very moment a dust rose from the direction of Cılgındı; the dust grew, and from the mouth of Keñ-Kol a second dust joined it. Out of the dust came first a war cry:

— Manas! Manas!

Then Tuuçunak appeared — a horse like a bird, and upon him a white-bearded whirlwind: Sarı Han. The letter had reached him; his heart could not endure the road, and he had left his army behind and ridden ahead. He split the ranks of Cediger as one tears paper; where he passed, horsemen toppled right and left. Cries rose from among the people: "Do not cut us down, father khan! The guilt is not ours; the guilty are Kançoro and Kıyaz!" Sarı Han heard it, and hearing it he reached for his sword; Coykuma — four-spanned at the hilt, thousand-edged at the blade — slid from its sheath and flashed once, only once, in the sun; and that flash was the seal of the judgment descending upon Cediger.

✦ ✦ ✦

That day Sarı Han became the battle itself. In one hand a cast-iron mace, in the other a spear; where the mace fell it crushed helmets, where the spear touched it emptied saddles. He had passed seventy years, but his wrist remembered forty years before; debt, they say, makes a man young again — Sarı Han owed a debt to Semetey and had come to pay it in blood. Once, in the bazaars of Buhara, when he was a scald-headed wretch in a patched coat, Semetey had counted him a man, made him khan over the Argın, set a cap upon his head and a horse beneath him; now the account of that cap, that horse, that manhood was being settled. Tuuçunak knew his master's wrath through his hooves; wherever he turned, there the front line was. He found Kıyaz in the crowd, chased him, cornered him; he leveled his spear at the khan upon Tootoru and was on the point of felling him when a sword came between — Kançoro's sword. It sheared the spear at the middle; the steel head fell away from the shaft. Sarı Han reined back hard, wheeled his horse, and roared into Kançoro's face as if spitting into it:

— Wicked son who fouls the cauldron! You fouled the very cauldron that fed you! You sucked the milk and bit the breast! May your bread strike you down, may your salt seize you; when you die, may your grave flee from you, may the earth refuse to receive you!

Then he turned upon Kıyaz and rode at him a second time; this time Kıyaz did not wait for the spear, but wrenched Tootoru's head around and fled. The man called khan fled before the eyes of his own army, and Cediger saw it.

Kançoro saw it too, and understood: while this old man stood on the field, neither Kıyaz nor the throne would remain. It was because he knew he could not defeat him in the open that he shut the door of valor and opened the door of treachery. He took Kıyaz with him and drew back into the narrow pass of Car-Kıya; he set ambushers along both flanks of the pass, had the Oçogor gun placed behind the rocks, and aimed the barrel with his own hand. Sarı Han, on the trail of his fleeing prey, plunged into the pass; in the narrow place Tuuçunak's stride slowed, and in that instant the trigger fell. The steel bolt of Oçogor whistled, and its whistle was short; the shot buried itself in the white-bearded khan's temple. Sarı Han straightened once in the saddle, swayed once; Coykuma did not slip from his hand — even dying, he did not let go his sword — and he sank forward upon Tuuçunak's neck and stayed so. The horse understood his master's weight; he walked out of the pass at a slow step, bowing his head to no one, and went toward Külçoro.

Külçoro took the khan, his temple bloodied, from the saddle into his arms, and that day he wept a second time; this time not in silence, but aloud, keening a lament:

— In Buhara you were a bald wretch; over the Argın you became khan; we called you in our narrow day, and you became our wing. Your white beard is dyed in blood, your white face has turned to earth. You did not die like a brave man in the open field; you were struck from behind a treacherous rock. Is it not a pity, my father khan — is it not a pity, this world!

When night pressed down, he carried Sarı Han to the banks of Tal-Mazar; he buried him in secret, showing no one, so that he should not fall into enemy hands, so that his bones should not be dishonored. He dug the grave with his own hands; he made his sword a spade and his shield a trough. He wrapped the khan in a strip torn from his Akolpok and laid him down, turned his face toward the qibla, and covered him with earth, handful by handful. He smoothed the grave's soil with his hand; he dragged dry grass across it so that no trace should remain, then gave that grass too to the wind. And in that moment a horse neighed out of the darkness: it was the stallion Bozayman, of Sarı Han's herd; no one had called him, no one had led him — he had come of himself, having caught his master's scent from far away. Külçoro looked at the sky, then looked at the horse; the law of the steppe was plain. He sacrificed Bozayman at the head of the grave; the blood ran into the fresh earth. "Do not go on foot in the other world, my father khan," he said; "your horse has gone before you — follow after."

At dawn Külçoro returned to the battle alone. The grief within him had become a whetstone; with every blow his sword was a little sharper. He asked no name of those who came before him and touched none who turned their backs; he answered only spear with spear and sword with sword. He drove Cediger before him, broke it, scattered it; the army was routed once more, fled once more. But in Kançoro's sack there were knots other than fear. He halted the fleeing army in a dry riverbed; he had a white-gray mare brought, had her killed, and drained her blood into a wide vessel.

— Dip your hands! he commanded. Whoever dips is counted dead; if he turns back, the oath will kill him. Chew the flour — let your daily bread bear witness. Lick the edge of the sword — let your death bear witness. Whoever flees this oath — his wife a widow, his child a slave, his hearth ashes!

The oath of death weighed heavier than the fear of death. Cediger dipped its hands in the blood, chewed the flour, licked the steel; some trembled as they dipped, some could not swallow, but not one held back — for Kançoro's executioners stood waiting to punish any who held back before the eyes of all. And the army, bound by the oath, was driven forward again, resembling less a host than a funeral procession.

Külçoro met them. He picked out Kıyaz in the crowd, spurred Akborçuk, leveled Sırnayza; the spear toppled the son of Bagış from Tootoru's back like a heap of dry grass. Külçoro bent from his horse and raised his sword — Kıyaz's head was a breath away — and in that very instant Kançoro arrived; sword struck sword, and the sparks set fire to the dusk. The two milk-brothers, for the first time in their lives, came face to face, steel to steel. But Kançoro had come not to fight but to delay; and as he delayed, he gave his marksmen the sign. Forty chosen marksmen rained arrows and bullets from the rocks. Külçoro turned and went at them; he broke all forty, one by one, and trampled all forty of their bows — but meanwhile a bullet found Akborçuk. The horse, running, folded onto his knees and did not rise again.

Külçoro was left on foot. We cannot even say they were counted — he himself did not count them — but he was wounded in seventy places: some grazes, some deep, all of them hot. As night fell he withdrew toward the Eçkilik mountains, covering his blood-trail with snow as he went; he took shelter in the rock hollow of Kapka-Taş. There, in the cold of the stone, he bound his wounds with mountain herbs and spoke a single sentence against the darkness: "It is not finished. There is an oath upon my neck; it is not finished."

✦ ✦ ✦

That night Semetey was alone at the pass of Ayrı-Beles. He lit no fire; fire is the business of those who have hope. He looked at the sky; the stars were in their places — only the order of men had broken. He thought of the direction of Talas: Kanıkey is sitting now at the threshold of the gray yurt, he said within himself; my mother always waits at the threshold, and the threshold belongs to those who wait. He thought of Ayçürök: his white swan, carrying a hidden three-month world within her; he had set out without bidding her farewell, and a road without farewell runs long. He thought of Çıyırdı: his grandmother, who had given two sons to the earth and now awaited her third mourning. Then he let go of thought as well; thought is the business of those who have hope. Once more he made his saddle a pillow, drew Akolpok over himself, and spoke the remainder of his testament into the darkness — Külçoro was not beside him, but he knew the words would arrive; on the steppe, a word finds its owner.

— If Seytek is born, he said, raise him until his twelfth year without letting the dust touch him; let no thorn touch his foot and no fear touch his heart. In his twelfth year, tell him his lineage; before that is too early, after that is too late. Tell my mother Kanıkey once more: let her do herself no harm; her life is now Seytek's life. Do not scold Kumayık; a hound howls after its master — let him howl. Do not let the dust settle on Akşumkar's perch; a falcon beats its wings when it sees the empty arm — let it beat them. Mourning too is a right; it is the animal's right as well.

Then he fell silent and slept; it was his second sleep on the shore of death, and it was deeper than the first.

When the horizon paled, Cediger came. The sound of their feet had begun in the night; thousands of hooves, thousands of rawhide shoes, drew near, beating the stone of the pass. First they formed twelve rings around the sleeping man; twelve rings seemed too few, and they made it forty-two. Forty-two rings of spears, forty-two rings of fear; the outermost were the bravest, the innermost trembled. For the man at the center did not stir, and a gray wolf that does not stir is more terrible than a gray wolf that attacks. Kıyaz watched from the outermost ring, and the longer he watched, the weaker his knees became. Even lying so, Semetey was like a dragon; his breath seemed to warm the plain.

— Kançoro, said Kıyaz, his voice near a whisper. Come, let us give this up. This man cannot be killed; and even if he is killed, his vengeance cannot be. Come, let us raise him khan; I will give him my crown, I will lead Tootoru behind him, I will kneel before him. He will forgive us; his line knows how to forgive.

Kançoro seized Kıyaz by the collar; his eyes were two hollows, two darknesses.

— In the middle of an army forty-two rings deep, you would offer a crown to one man? Cediger would laugh at it; history would spit on it. If he opens his eyes, we are all dead men; strike while they are closed! If you are afraid, stand aside — and leave me the crown, and the spear too!

And he turned to the army and bellowed; his voice multiplied against the walls of the pass:

— Forward, Cediger! You swore the oath, you licked the blood! Forward!

Semetey opened his eyes. He saw the forty-two rings of spears; he saw the empty sky overhead — the black eagle was not there; he saw the empty ground beside him — Külçoro was not there, Akkelte had fallen silent, Taybuurul was long gone. The forty çilten too had withdrawn; the shadow of Kıdır lay now over other servants of God. He saw everything, and at the sum of what he saw he laughed like a gray wolf.

— So this is how it is, he said; the world is filth. The one you call friend sells you for a throne, the one you call horse founders on the slope, the one you call gun falls silent in the narrow day. Come then, death; I do not count you worth the point of my sword, but it will not do to turn away a guest who comes to the door.

He did not rise; he only propped himself on his elbow, half-reclining against the saddle, and surveyed the forty-two rings of the army as one surveys a wedding crowd. Wherever his gaze touched, the spears drew back a finger's breadth; the eye of a man on the threshold of death weighs heavier than the eyes of the living. Kıyaz, pushed forward by Kançoro, stepped out from among the rings; in his hand was a spear, and on the spear's point trembled the first light of morning. He took one step and stopped; took another step and stopped. From behind came Kançoro's voice, like the hiss of a serpent: "Strike. Strike now." Kıyaz leveled the spear; the point turned toward the breast of the gray wolf lying on the ground, the distance between them melting step by step; and the steppe, that morning, held its breath for as long as it could hold it.

CHAPTER 32

The Treacherous Spear and the Usurper's Throne

— ❖ —

The sky that morning was the color of lead; the waters of the Kürpüldök ran gray and turbid, and among the reeds the wind moaned like a woman keening a grief before it has come. Kıyaz crouched in the shadow of the rushes, wetting the shaft of his spear with the sweat of his palm as he waited. When he saw Semetey on the far slope — dismounted, Akolpok drawn over his shoulder — the strength went out of his knees. That stance, that shoulder, that head lifted toward the sky — this was the son of Manas; his majesty was like a mountain's, his gaze like an eagle's. Kıyaz's heart melted; he wanted to wheel his horse and flee.

— Where to, — said the shadow behind him. It was Kançoro; his voice poured into his ear like the hiss of a serpent. — Where would you run, brave Kıyaz? If you do not bring down this lion today, tomorrow he brings down you. Do you think Cediger's ten thousand

will stand behind you? If you turn back, the first spear will be planted in your own spine — that I swear.

— No man can stand against him, — whispered Kıyaz. His lips had gone dry. — I looked into his eyes, and everything within me spilled out. This man has guardians; the çilten watch over him.

— The çilten are asleep, — said Kançoro, and he laughed between his teeth. — The forty companions who guarded him are scattered; Külçoro is two days' ride away. He is alone, he is weary, he is in mourning. Strike from behind. Even a lion falls when struck from behind. And if you do not strike, Kıyaz, — here his voice turned to stone, — know that I will strike you.

Kıyaz looked at him, then at the far slope. Within himself he reasoned: this man carries the blood-debt of my father Toltoy; vengeance is my right. But right is claimed on the field of men, not in the reed-beds. If I am a man, I go out to face him; if I am a coward, I turn and go — but what is this third thing, this lying in ambush? Then he saw Kançoro's eyes; in those eyes he saw his own corpse. Within Kıyaz, fear devoured fear: he feared the lion before him, and feared the serpent behind him more. He crept forward through the reeds on his belly; three times he stopped, three times his heart rose into his mouth, three times he remembered Kançoro's oath of death and crept on. In that hour Semetey was thinking of his forefather Manas. On this steppe, he was musing, did my father once stand just so; did he press his face into Akkula's mane and breathe in Talas like this? Kançoro's turning away was a wound in his heart, and the love he had borne Çubak's son was salt upon that wound. We raised him on our own milk, he was saying; we lifted him up with our own hands. Fear not the enemy without, Bakay had said once; fear the enemy within — the wolf inside the fold knows the flock better than the shepherd does. He seemed to hear the hoofbeats of Akkula; his gaze drifted far away, to the darkened ridges of Talas. And in that moment of reverie the treacherous spear was driven into the very middle of his back, between the shoulder blades.

The steppe shuddered with a great moan. Akşumkar tore the air with a scream, Aktaygan howled; both had known, and known too late. Semetey staggered — staggered but did not fall; when he turned and drew Zülfikar, the steel of the blade flashed like lightning on a cloudless day. At the sight of that steel, Kıyaz's wits deserted him; he dropped his spear and fled, and how he gained his horse, how he crossed the reed-bed, he

himself never knew. Once he looked back: the wounded lion still stood, sword in hand, his blood seeping into the white felt of Akolpok.

That day the sky darkened and went on darkening. At noon it became night; the heavens thundered, thundered three times, lightning hammered the peaks of the Ala-Too, and then hail burst loose — hailstones big as sheep's heads, turning the steppe into a field of white stones. Semetey drew Akolpok, the mantle of his forefather Manas, over himself and lay down in the lee of a shelter. The falcon Akşumkar settled at his side; the hound Aktaygan curled at his feet. The wound throbbed; the world spun. Through the white curtain of the hail a light approached; out of the light came a girl — her face the moon, her hair the night, her name Kökmonçok. She was a peri; she had come down from the mountain of Kayıpçı.

— Rise, son of the lion, — she said. Her voice was like the voice of water. — Your death is not in this spear. The Vanished Ones desire you; go, be healed, and when your day comes, you will return.

Semetey could say nothing; his tongue grew heavy, his eyelids closed. Kökmonçok stretched out her hand; the hail stopped, and a road opened between earth and sky. When morning came and the sun broke upon the hailstones, in that shelter there was no Semetey, no Akşumkar, no Aktaygan. There were only traces of blood on the felt, and, lying on the ground like a script no one could read, the spear.

This is what Külçoro found when he came: he found the blood, he found the spear, and his elder brother he did not find. Three days and three nights he searched; he searched the reed-beds span by span, the hillsides stone by stone. There was neither his body nor his living self. Had he been alive, he would have answered; had he been dead, he would have lain there; he was neither — he was vanished. When he reached the rise of the forked ridge his knees gave way; he dismounted and fell upon the earth.

— My brother, — he said, — my black-flamed lion! You who feared not Konurbay at Beecin — have you gone to the spear of treacherous Kıyaz? If you live, give a cry; if you are dead, give a sign! To whom have you left Talas, to whom have you left Çürök, to whom have you left the trust she carries in her womb? The sky is desolate above me, the earth lies hard beneath me. While this cursed arm of mine could move, while these doomed eyes of mine could see, I failed to guard you — with this stain on my face, how shall I live?

Külçoro wept blood; his tears ran out, and blood came in their place. He fell upon the mane and shook against the horse's neck: — Riding back from Beecin, — he said, — at the

head of Karagöl we swore an oath; we said, if we die, one grave — if we live, one homeland. My oath is left half-kept, my brother; if I knew your grave, I would enter it; if I knew your homeland, I would go to it. The steppe listened, the mountain listened, no one answered. Only, high up, a bird circled; Külçoro lifted his head and looked — was it Akşumkar, was it not, he could not tell. The bird circled three times, glided away toward the mountain of Kayıpçı, and was gone. Külçoro gazed long in that direction; something dropped into his heart — something he could not name, something other than death.

In those same hours smoke was rising over Keñ-Kol. Kançoro and Kıyaz had driven the army into the blessed valley of Talas, and their first deed had been the murder of Manas's smith. The lame master Bölökbay — Bölökbay who in olden days, together with master Davut, had forged Zülfikar and Akkelte for Manas, whose forge-sparks carried the breath of the çilten — was caught at his anvil. The old man fought back with his forty-pound hammer, with the bellows-handle, with red-hot iron; alone, he kept a whole company of soldiers out of his forge. But the crowd was like the sea; in the end they threw the master down upon his own anvil. With his last breath the old man reached for his bellows; the bellows groaned once, one last spark rose from the forge, climbed spinning upward, and vanished into the smoke. Bölökbay died with his face turned toward his forge. Forty years he had hammered iron at that hearth; it was he who had quenched Manas's sword, he who had linked the rings of Semetey's mail. The accursed hands killed the master, but they could not put out his forge; they buried the ember in ash, and the ash kept the ember. They broke open the mouth of the treasury; whatever remained of Manas and of Semetey — ingots, armor, golden harness — was loaded onto camels' backs. Keñ-Kol was plundered, the hearths were extinguished, and in Talas that day it was forbidden to speak the name of Semetey.

At the council convened in the reed-marsh of Üyrülmö, two voices contended. Kıyaz poured out the fear inside him and called it reason:

— Let us not touch Külçoro, — he said. — Whoever lays a hand on that steel loses the hand. Let us offer him a tulpar, offer him yellow gold, make him a friend; let his blood be far from us. He is the spark of Manas's hearth; whoever treads on a spark, his sandal catches fire.

Kançoro rose from his place; his eyes were like iron in the coals.

— Gold? — he said. — Tomorrow he raises an army with that gold, and the day after he hangs both our heads on the gate of Talas. Either Külçoro comes into my hands alive, or

I cut Cediger down to a man — choose, old Kıyaz! I swear this oath: whoever does not take him alive is my enemy.

The council cowered; Kıyaz cowered. The trackers were loosed upon the steppe.

As for Külçoro, he was wounded in ninety places; his horse had fallen, his quiver was empty, and there remained at his side only the sword Coykuma. Crawling, he climbed the mountain of Kayıpçı, came to the black mouth of Kara-Üñkür, and fell upon its threshold:

— Be a father to me, be a mother to me, blessed cave, — he said. — I have no father at my back, no brother at my side; hide me, and grant me one grace from the grace of the Vanished Ones.

The cave's cool breath touched his face; the stone, it seemed, grew warm as a mother's embrace. Külçoro went in and was buried in the darkness. In the darkness there was the sound of water, and something like a breathing that came from deep, very deep; Külçoro drew close to that breath, leaned his wounds against the stone, and for three days and three nights ate no bread and drank no water — the mountain watched over him, the mountain fed him. But a trail is a trail; a drop of blood opens on the snow like a rose. The trackers came reading the blood, found the cave, and the army ringed the mountain. Arrows fell like rain upon the cave's mouth; Külçoro came out of the darkness, and Coykuma turned to lightning in his hand. He charged once — ten men went down; he charged again — twenty men were laid out. He cut down fifty champions before that door; fifty corpses piled one upon another until they made a wall of flesh at the mouth of the cave. But wound calls to wound, and blood carries strength away. Lasso upon lasso was flung about his arms; ten ropes snapped, the eleventh held. The lion of yesterday was dragged to the ground.

They brought him alive before Kançoro. Kançoro laughed; that laugh was colder than the black water that does not freeze even in winter.

— Look at the arm that holds the sword, — he said. — Let this arm hold a sword no more.

And he had it done as he said: he had Külçoro's shoulder blade gouged out, had his arm cut off, had his blood poured out upon the mountain stone. But he did not kill him — death seemed too little for him. He summoned Karagul, the master of the horse herds:

— Take this one, — he said. — Let him be your slave, your bondsman. Let him gather dung, let him haul wood; let the world see how the leavings of Manas's hearth crawl beneath the whip.

The lion of yesterday — Külçoro, who once on Taytoru had chased Konurbay — walked away that day to Karagul's herds with a dung-basket on his back, rawhide sandals on his feet, and his neck bowed. Karagul was a coarse man, and his whip was quicker than his tongue. — Look at this broken-winged companion, — he jeered the first day, — yesterday he was the lion of Talas, today he is my dog. Haul wood, gather dung, light my fire; move slowly and your back will do the talking. Külçoro hauled wood, gathered dung, lit the fire. When the whip cracked across his back he clenched his teeth, and not one groan left his mouth. The herdsmen marveled at this silence; some pitied him and secretly broke off part of their bread for him; some shrank from him and could not meet his eyes — for in those eyes was not a dead ember but an ember banked under ash. Only at night, when the herds slept and the steppe turned all to stars, Külçoro would lift his head to the sky and speak within himself: be patient, he told himself; be patient. The Vanished Ones live, and from the Vanished Ones men return. My father Çubak became a man through patience; my brother Semetey found his lineage through patience. My bone has been gouged, my arm is gone — my oath still stands. ***

In Talas that autumn, the wedding drum and the mourning drum were beaten into one another. The lords of Cediger spread the white felt, seated Kançoro upon it, lifted him nine times and nine times set him down; a golden crown was placed on his head, a golden throne drawn up beneath him. The khojas and the mullahs assembled; prayers were read, votive offerings vowed. And before Semetey's mourning had filled its forty days, his lesser wife Çaçıkey adorned and arrayed herself and, without one tear in her eye, entered into marriage with Kançoro. When she heard the news of her husband's death — so it is told — the corner of her lip had smiled; now her whole face was smiling. The old women turned their faces away as she passed; the young brides spat behind her. Çaçıkey paid no heed; she supposed that in the shadow of a golden crown the stain on a face cannot be seen. Criers shouted it in market and bazaar: henceforth this people would be called the people of Kançoro Han; the tongue that spoke the name of Semetey would be cut out, and the head that spoke the name of Manas would fall.

The new khan's first decree was oppression. He laid tribute upon the Kyrgyz: he demanded a thousand dun camels, a thousand black mares with blazed foreheads, a thousand camel-loads of tea, and red gold besides. Whoever did not give, his homestead was razed; whoever stood against it, his hearth was put out. The people could not endure it; in the middle of the night the yurts were struck, caravans slipped silently onto the roads,

whole camps fled toward the snow-passes of Kapçal. At the heads of the passes the fugitives stopped, looked back at the blessed valley of Talas, and wept together:

— Were our Semetey alive, — they said, — would we have seen this black day? A fox has entered the lion's den; the people are being forced to forget their own son. Return from the Vanished, our lion — return from the Vanished!

Kançoro sat on his throne, but he could not sit at ease. Night after night in his dreams he saw the same thing: a bird, a white bird, rising from the mountain of Kayıpçı and flying toward Talas. He would wake and stir, summon the sentry at the door and ask: Has Semetey's body been found? It had not. Of him whose body is not found, the living self is to be feared; the usurper's throne was like a stake driven into a hollow — the deeper it was hammered, the more it swayed. He covered his fear with cruelty; and the arrow of that cruelty struck deepest of all into the most venerable of white beards. The saintly elder Bakay — the mind-father of Manas, the guide of Semetey, Bakay whose white beard covered his breast — was dragged forth at Kançoro's command. Eighty champions swarmed upon him; hauling him between them like the goat-carcass in the game of gökbörü, they dragged the old man in the dust. His white beard was plucked out, his mustache plucked out, the old armor on his back torn to pieces, his ribs cracked and splintered. The old man turned his dust-smeared face to the sky:

— O mighty God, — he said, — rather than see this degradation in my old age, would that I had been laid in the earth on the same day as Manas! Kanıkey had a saying; when this Kançoro was still a babe she suckled him, and from her breast came blood instead of milk. "This child will grow into an enemy who withers the line," said that stately bride; and we laughed and let it pass. Ah, blind that we were; the prophecy grew up before our eyes and we did not see it. Our age is over, our word is spent; what comes after belongs to those who remain.

In those days grief was like a wolf chasing grief; before one had gone, the next arrived. One night, Akcoltoy, son of Bölökbay — his father martyred at his anvil, he himself initiated into the weather-worker's hearth — stole secretly into Kanıkey's yurt. He dropped to his knees and spoke, breathless:

— Great mother, — he said, — I bring word from my vanished lord. Before he was lost, my lord Semetey left this charge: if the trust in Ayçürök's womb is born a boy, let his name be Seytek. If he grows up alive, let him be a wing to Külçoro, a comrade; it is he who

will take back Talas, he who will take the vengeance. This is the testament; I came so that this word should not die even if I do.

Kanıkey did not beat her knees, did not tear her hair; the stately woman sat like stone, and only her hands trembled. — So he left a testament, — she said softly. — He who leaves a testament leaves hope too, Akcoltoy. Speak this word to no one again; a word spoken before its time becomes a bird, flies away, and alights in the enemy's hand. A silence fell within the yurt; only the embers of the hearth crackled. In the corner sat old Çıyırdı — the great mother who had borne Manas and raised Semetey on her knee — and she heard this word, and her world went dark. My grandson is dead, since his testament has come, she said within herself; the son is gone, the grandson is gone — what is left to me in this world? There are women on the steppe who have seen the mourning of six sons and live on; Çıyırdı had no place left in her to live. In the exile of Altay there had been hope — Manas was in her womb. In the mourning for Manas there had been hope — Semetey was in her arms. Now her arms were empty, her hope was vanished. She said nothing to anyone. From the bottom of her chest she drew out the white dagger bought long ago for six thousand camels and a thousand foals; she kissed it three times, three times raised it to her brow. — My Manas, — was all she said, — open your door; your mother is coming. Then she set the dagger against her side and bore down upon it.

When Kanıkey came in, she found her mother-in-law lying in her blood. She knelt, took the white-haired head onto her knees; from her eyes came blood in place of tears.

— Mother of my husband, great mother, — she keened, — blessed mother who lay in exile in Altay and brought Manas into the world! You who endured hunger, endured exile, endured the mourning of a son — the mourning of a grandson you could not endure. To whom shall I declare your white milk forgiven; for whom shall I keep your white dagger? The black days of Talas are not ended, mother; you have gone, I remain; the burden of those who remain falls to those who remain.

To Kançoro this death was an entertainment, this lament glad tidings. But there was a thorn in him that pricked day and night: the child in Ayçürök's womb. Until that thorn was drawn, the throne would show no ease. He drew Kıyaz to his side and dripped his poison into his ear:

— Brave Kıyaz, — he said, — take Çürök as spoil, make her your wife, carry her to your palace — she is lawfully yours. But mind what is in her womb: if a girl is born, well and good; if a boy is born, steal him before he is even named, and silence his voice. If that

boy grows up he will devour both our heads; the line of Manas is a serpent's line — it does not die until its tail is crushed.

Kıyaz nodded; the oath of a coward comes quickly.

And the Cediger army marched on the orda of Talas. The gatekeepers of the orda — the last faithful, who had eaten Semetey's bread — held the gates; they resisted one day, they resisted two days, they resisted three days and three nights. The eldest among them, a white-mustached warrior, shouted from the top of the rampart: — This gate Manas built and Semetey made fast; it does not open to Cediger's axe! This is the threshold whose bread we have eaten; for the man who dies on his threshold no mourning is held — a feast is held! The arrows ran out, and they threw stones; the stones ran out, and they bared their breasts. In the end the gates were battered down with logs. The shade-giving plane trees of the orda fell to the axes; the walls were torn up and thrown down; the sealed mouth of the treasury was slit open with swords. Six tümen of horses were driven off on one side, ninety tümen of sheep and cattle on the other; gold and silver were carried away sack by sack, and the brides and maidens were strung on a rope as slaves. The waters of Talas ran turbid that week; it is said the turbidness was not from earth, but from tears.

Only one man escaped that pillage: Akcoltoy. With the weather-craft learned at his father's hearth he dipped his stone in water and read the sky; the weather broke, the wind turned, and a fog thick as milk settled on the valley. Through that fog Akcoltoy slid like a shadow, passed among the horses, and made his way unseen toward the mountain of Kayıpçı. Those who looked after him saw only the fog; they could not know that within the fog a hope was escaping to freedom. ***

In the midst of the pillage a woman rose to her feet. Ayçürök — daughter of Akun Han, the Ayçürök who had put on the white swan's form and found Semetey — saw the orda being plundered and reached for the sword on the wall. It was Zülfikar, the relic of Manas; its sheath darkened with age, its steel that never sleeps. When the sword left the sheath, the inside of the yurt seemed to fill with light. The woman great with child wound her hair about her waist and planted herself on the threshold; the first Cediger champion who rushed in remained on the threshold, the second at the door, the third in the courtyard. Ayçürök turned like a tigress; wherever Zülfikar touched a hand, there it flowed through like water. — Come, — the woman cried, and her voice carried over the ramparts, — come, men of Cediger! Whoever counts the bride of Manas as plunder, let him come and take her! The master who forged this sword is dead, the warrior who girded it is

vanished; but steel does not forget — steel knows its master's vengeance! As the day turned toward evening, some hundred champions lay strewn in the courtyard of the orda; the rest had drawn far off, and no man could be found to approach. Kıyaz too came and looked; he could neither push into that heat nor bring his hand to cast the cold noose. That he feared a woman he could not admit even to himself; he withdrew to the rear of the army and was silent.

Kançoro did not come near, but he tightened the ring and sent word; his word was sharper than a spear:

— Say to Ayçürök: two roads lie before her. Either she becomes chief wife to Kıyaz and sits as sultana in Ceti-Özön — gold upon her head, silk beneath her. Or she resists: that lovely hair will be torn out lock by lock, those hazel eyes will be put out, a sooty black kaftan will be thrown over her back, and she will be driven to her father Akun's city as a beggar. Let her think on it until evening.

As the red of evening struck the broken walls of the orda, Ayçürök was left alone with her thoughts. If only I had my swan's form, she said within herself; if I could only rise into that sky, I would cross the Çüy, circle the mountain of Kayıpçı, and find my vanished one. But the swan-form had long since gone into the ashes, the wings had long been bound; the girl who had descended from the sky was caught in the snare of the earth. She tightened her hand on the sword's hilt; she had strength enough to kill, heart enough to die. But in her womb the trust stirred — a kick, a small, stubborn kick. Semetey's testament echoed in her ear: his name shall be Seytek. If I die, he dies too, she said within herself; if I fight, they kill me, and he dies too. There was no road to dying and none to killing. Zülfikar grew heavy in her hand; the tigress, for her cub's sake, lowered her claw.

In those hours Kançoro was swelling the tally of his cruelty. Old Kanıkey — daughter of Temirkan, stately wife of Manas, the Kanıkey who had walked the roads of Buhara barefoot with the infant Semetey — he had thrown into a dungeon forty rope-lengths deep; it was not enough, and he had her brought up and bound between two barren heifers. As the heifers shied and strained apart, the old woman's bones were racked; and Kançoro watched. Kanıkey did not groan; only once did she lift her head and look at the man to whom she had given milk. In that look there was neither pleading nor fear; only the bitter truth of the old prophecy. Kançoro could not bear that look, and turned his face away.

The news of the cruelty reached the horse pastures, reached Külçoro's wife. Akbala — daughter of Camgırçı, Akbala whose husband had been made a slave, whose elder Kanıkey, old enough to be her mother-in-law, had been bound between heifers — heard it, threw off her veil, thrust her dagger into her bosom, and leapt bareback onto a tethered gray colt. With naked dagger she plunged into the midst of Cediger; she brought down one champion, brought down two, bathed seven champions in their own blood. Her eye was searching for Kançoro; and she found him. She drove the gray colt straight at him. But Kançoro was a master of the spear; he swung his bronze spear, cased in elephant hide, a single time. The spear found Akbala's breast. The young woman fell from the horse like a leaf; and as she fell, her face was turned toward the mountain of Kayıpçı, toward the place where her husband was enslaved. The steppe gathered one more valiant woman to its breast; the gray colt, masterless, fled neighing toward the mountains. When the news reached the horse pastures, Külçoro was under his dung-basket. Karagul's herdsman told it laughing: that wife of yours, he said — mounted a gray colt, felled seven warriors, and gave up her life at last on Kançoro's spear. Külçoro's single arm tightened on the basket's rope, tightened, and loosened. He did not raise his head; he did not show his tears. Only that night, at the edge of the herd, beneath the stars, he stood alone and added one more line to his oath: Akbala, he said; your blood too has been written in the ledger. The ledger is swelling; the day will come, and the account will be settled.

✦ ✦ ✦

Kıyaz gathered up his share: he had six thousand camels loaded, had the treasure wrapped onto forty elephants, and taking Ayçürök — the tigress, the swan with weeping eyes — he marched for Ceti-Özön. He came to the headland of Cerge-Tal; at the meeting of the waters, on the green flat, he had his white pavilion raised, planted his standard, and sat as khan. But a worm was gnawing within him: what will the people say? They will say Kıyaz took the woman like plunder. To keep them from saying it, he proclaimed a feast such as had never been seen. Ninety mares were slaughtered; kımız was spread like a lake; the mounted spear-tilts were set up, the strongmen closed in wrestling; there were archery races, horse races; largesse was scattered, prizes dealt out. At that feast the poor of Cediger ate their fill, and its greedy too. The cauldrons boiled the day long; meat was heaped like a mountain, kımız flowed like a river. But when they put a saz into the hands of an old bard

wandering among the pavilions, the bard was silent; he praised neither Kıyaz nor the feast. — The songs I know, — he said, — are the songs of other men; if I sing them here, my head is forfeit, and if I do not sing them, my word dies. He laid down the saz, melted into the crowd, and was gone.

At midnight — when the drums had fallen silent and the torches burned low — the khojas gathered, the qibla was asked, and Ayçürök's marriage to Kıyaz was performed. Ayçürök struggled; she felt for her swan's form, and the form was not given; she felt for wings, and the wings were bound. She had fallen into a snare she could not break; she bowed her head and laid her hands upon her womb. Within her the trust stirred again — as if to say, "I am here." Ayçürök closed her eyes and swore within herself: only be born, she said; only be born. Your name shall be Seytek; the rest you will finish yourself.

On the day after the feast, on the field of men, the turn at spear-tilting came to the champions. First into the field rode Kücürmön — Kançoro's favorite, the cruel champion who had gouged Külçoro's shoulder blade at Kara-Üñkür. He wheeled his horse about the field with his enormous bulk, bellowing for an opponent; three times he called, three times no voice answered. Even the bravest of Cediger shuddered to come out against him.

Then there was a stir at the edge of the field. On a young gray horse a stripling rode forward, his shoulders newly broadening. The crowd whispered: whose is this, of what camp is he the son? He was the son whom Er Kutu had raised in secret; his name was Karadöö. Kutu had raised him far from all eyes, beyond the mountain, and taught him to shoot the bow, to cast the spear, to sleep in a horse's mane; for one night he had seen in a dream a white-bearded saint, and the saint had said to him: hide your son, feed your horse; on the black day there is a spear's work to be done. The gray horse he rode — so they say — Hızır himself had found and driven into Kutu's herd; in its gait was the spark of the tulpar line. When Kücürmön saw the boy he burst out laughing: — Have the men of Cediger run out, — he said, — that you send against me a child still smelling of milk? Come out then, child; I will bring your mother's milk out through your nose, and you will learn what a spear is. Kutu, holding his son's stirrup, bent to his ear:

— Son, — he said, — that giant's armor is thick, his body is like a fortress; do not strike here and there, do not waste the spear. Watch the place on his chest where shield and armor meet — there is the house of his life. Strike once, but strike with the whole of your heart. I have read your fortune: your fortune came out white. Do not fear.

Karadöö made no answer; on his young face there was neither anger nor fear — only his father's word, and the whiteness of the omen. The two riders broke from the two ends of the field. The earth rumbled; Kücürmön's spear was a plane-tree pole, and beside it Karadöö's was like a reed. They met — at the last instant Karadöö swerved low, and the giant spear grazed his shoulder and passed into emptiness; his own spear he drove into the place his father had named, into the house of the life. Kücürmön turned once in the air and came down like a mountain falling. For a moment the field was silent; then from Cediger's men to the Kyrgyz captives, a roar broke from every mouth. Karadöö took his prize and rode from the field with his head high.

The captive Kyrgyz looked at one another; no one said anything, but everyone thought the same thing. The hand that had maimed Külçoro had been felled by a child's spear. So the wheel did turn; so the spark did live beneath the ashes. That night the stars burned differently over Ceti-Özön. Ayçürök looked up at those stars through the smoke-hole of the pavilion; the trust in her womb turned, kicked, as if it were in haste. And on the mountain of Kayıpçı the darkness of Kara-Üñkür sheltered a sleeper, and in Karagul's herds a slave clenched his teeth beneath a dung-basket. All three were waiting: the mother, the vanished, and the slave — all three waiting for the same name. The wind blew from Ceti-Özön toward Talas; as if it already carried that name: Seytek.

CHAPTER 33

The Storm of Kürpüldök and the Great Vanishing

— ❖ —

The black tidings came to Talas not on the wing of a bird but on the croup of a mullah's weary horse. Mullah Küdür had beaten the road for eight days; his face was dust, his beard was hoarfrost, and with a folded paper in his breast he collapsed at the threshold of the ordo. The paper was written in the Kalmak script; whoever took it in hand could make nothing of it, until Bakay lowered those old eyes of his to the lines. As the elder read, the furrows in his brow deepened; as he read, he clutched at the felt beside his knee.

— Agerkeç has written it, he said at last. Kökçö's dignified widow has stretched out a friend's hand from within the enemy's camp. The traitor Kerimbay has not sat idle; taking the young khan Ümütöy along with him, he has roused Capan's forty thousand soldiers and the mountain-toppling giant Kızıluyuk. From the Mançu a hundred thousand men have risen; at their head rides Neskara's son, the one-eyed Madıkan, and beneath him the

single-horned Blue Bull. Before ten days are out they will come down upon Talas like a flood.

A silence fell over the ordo so deep that the very fibers of the felt could be heard. Semetey rose to his feet; those broad shoulders inherited from his father, that keen gaze, stood in the dimness of the tent like a crag.

— Before we could muster an army, the enemy would cross the Ala-Too, he said. Four of us will go. Myself, Bakay my father, Külçoro, Kançoro. A true man prevails not by numbers, but by his heart.

For an instant a shadow flickered in Kançoro's eye; no one saw it. Külçoro was already at his horse's side. Bakay stroked his beard and said nothing; the word he did not say would be much remembered afterward.

The four of them, on the backs of four tulpars, beat the road for eight days and eight nights. By day they fed on the yellow of the steppe, by night on the blue of the stars; the kumis ran out, the kurut ran out, the heart did not run out. In the passes the snow stood knee-deep; the horses crossed the ice-bound streams with steam pluming from their nostrils. All along the way Bakay told of the old days: of the Great Campaign, of the approaches to Beecin, of Almambet's last night. Külçoro drank in every word like kumis; Kançoro's eye, however, was ever on the horizon, as if he were seeking there some share for himself. On the evening of the eighth day they came to the foot of the Great İngen mountain, to the Kürpüldök whose waters foamed as they broke upon the stones. There, in a sheltered hollow, a patched gray yurt sent up its smoke. They rode up; at the door stood Ceenbay of Camgırçı's line — once a bey of substance, now a man fallen into poverty, his eyes sunk deep in their hollows.

— The guest is blessed, said Ceenbay; enter. But the food I can give you is scant, and the news I must give you is bitter.

By the hearth, in a lowered voice, he told them: Capan's forty thousand had filled the valley; the Mançu's hundred thousand had blackened the hills; the giant Kızıluyuk felled a plane tree at a single blow, and when Madıkan's Blue Bull bellowed, stone split asunder. Kançoro bit his lip as he listened.

— Let us put off the guise of warriors, he said; let us dress as herdsmen and steal in among them. Such are their numbers, such is their strength; cunning is what is needed.

Semetey lifted his head; his voice was low, yet it seemed to make the tent-pole tremble.

— The son of Manas does not crawl like a thief. Spying is the coward's art. We shall plant our standard; let the enemy come looking for us.

And while the horizon was still the color of ash, the crimson standard with its golden crescent, the standard left by Manas, was planted upon the ridge above the Kürpüldök. Bakay set the standard's shaft into the earth with his own hands; and as he set it, an ancient prayer spilled from his lips — the name of Manas, the name of Kıdır, the names of the forty çilten stood side by side in that prayer. The wind tested the standard once, then knew it; knew it, and unfurled it. The scarlet cloth billowed in the first light of the rising day like a wound, like an oath. Semetey knelt at the standard's foot: — Father, he said, let your shadow be over us; from the ground where you stood, let us not fall.

Below, in the valley, the enemy camp was waking. The first to see was a Capan sentry; his hands tangled with his feet, his tongue cleaved to his palate. Then a murmur ran from tent to tent: the standard of Manas! Has the dead man risen, has the departed returned? Some wished to flee, some fell to dividing the spoils before they were won; the Capan bey fell upon the Mançu bey, the Mançu bey upon his Kazak, and swords tasted the blood of friends. As for Kerimbay — that double-faced, that slippery man — under cover of night he sent two separate letters to two separate tents; in one he swore, "I shall have the Kirghiz slaughtered for you," and in the other he pleaded, "I stand with you, I bear no guilt." Those who did not know him might think a serpent could have two heads but never two tongues.

Ceenbay, too, began his own small game in those days. By day he sat at Semetey's hearth reckoning up the enemy's numbers; by night he made his way to Kerimbay's tent and whispered the condition of the heroes; he ate from two tables and took feed from two palms. Poverty purifies some men and bends others crooked; Ceenbay it had bent. Bakay had sensed the furtiveness in his eyes from the first day, but he kept silent; on the steppe one feeds even the jackal knowingly, that it may bring word of the wolf's coming.

The battle broke on the third day, when the sun had climbed a spear's height. As vanguard came Cankoybos, Capan's camel-rider; his camel howled, and he himself bellowed. Kançoro spurred his horse, swung his axe once, swung it twice, and on the third swing split Cankoybos's helmet like a melon. But then the earth shook: in his eight layers of iron armor the giant Kızıluyuk came down into the field, leaping a stream at a single stride. Kançoro did not flinch — let us not deny him his due; he drove his spear through five of the eight layers, at the sixth the iron held, the giant shook himself once, and Kançoro fell from his horse to the gray earth.

Then Semetey clamped Sırnayza against his flank and sent Surkoyon forward. The horse became a bird, the spear became lightning; Sırnayza passed through all eight of the eight layers and entered the giant's throat. The mountainous body sank first to its knees, then toppled onto its side; where it fell, the waters of the Kürpüldök surged for a moment out of their bed.

Now into the field came Madıkan — Neskara's one-eyed son, the single-horned Blue Bull beneath him. Wherever the bull struck its hoof a pit opened, and whenever Madıkan laughed, stones came tumbling from the hilltops. First Külçoro rose to face him; the two of them, like two mountain ranges, rained words upon one another. Madıkan praised the Tıyan-Şan and numbered the strength of his fathers; Külçoro praised the Ala-Too and invoked the name of Almambet.

— Your mountain is a heap of stones, said Madıkan; my bull will gore it open with his horn!

— Your bull is a heap of meat, said Külçoro; my spear will be his stable!

Night fell, the drums were beaten, the armies drew apart. That night the soldiery of Capan, in terror of the standard and of the giant's corpse, melted into the darkness and fled. The next day Madıkan came out into the field alone, and that day was a black day: first he met Semetey — their spears clashed, the sinew of Semetey's wrist was torn, and the hero slid from his saddle; then he felled Kançoro with a single stroke; last of all he brought old Bakay, that mighty plane tree, down to the gray earth. All three lived, all three were wounded, all three of their hearts were bleeding.

There remained Külçoro. They dismounted and gripped each other by the sash; for two days and a night they grappled. For two days and a night the earth groaned; for two days and a night the Kürpüldök swallowed its own foam. Madıkan lifted him once and dashed him down, and the ground was hollowed; Külçoro lifted him once and dashed him down, and the stones were crushed to powder. Their backs became lakes of sweat, their palms were hennaed with blood. At the end of the second night Külçoro's knees trembled; hope was guttering out like the last oil in a lamp. On the hilltop Bakay's lips were moving as he watched; whether it was prayer or lament, no one could tell. And in that very moment the veil between sky and earth was drawn aside: four riders appeared — Manas upon Akkula, and behind him Almambet, Çubak, Sırgak; their spirits had come with their tulpars, their armor of moonlight, their faces of the old days. Almambet bent over his son:

— Külçoro, my foal, I have given you the strength of my right hand, I have given you the strength of my left. Clench your teeth; your father's blood does not sleep in you.

All at once Külçoro's palms turned to live coals, his back was bound with iron. He squeezed once — Madıkan's ribs cracked; he heaved once — the one-eyed giant staggered. Madıkan, for the first time in his life, took a step backward.

— Hold, he said, gasping; the hour of the meal has come. A true man does not strike a hungry foe. Let me fill my belly, and I shall return.

Kançoro cried out: "Do not let him go — strike now!" But Bakay raised his hand.

— Custom is custom, he said. A word given to an enemy is a word given to God. Let him go, let him eat his fill, let him return; the reckoning will not flee, and fate will not miss its mark.

And Madıkan went to his table; the great reckoning was left in trust to the dawn.

✦ ✦ ✦

Madıkan's table was no table but a rehearsal of doomsday. Eleven bears were turned on the fire; hundreds of sheep and dozens of horses were devoured; the giant bent to the river and drank, and drank, until one arm of the Kürpüldök ran dry. Three days he ate, three days he drank, three days he stretched himself. Külçoro, meanwhile, passed those three days, and the four before them, fasting; for seven days not a morsel had passed his throat, but neither had a moment's sleep passed his eyes. Bakay held out kumis to him; he would not drink.

— My father Almambet died hungry on the road to Beecin, he said. I will not fight on a full belly and shame his spirit.

Madıkan returned, his belly a drum, his eye full of blood. His first spear-thrust struck so hard that Külçoro's shield split in two; the hero staggered back three paces, his knee kissed the earth — but he did not fall. He did not fall, and he rose. He rose, and he answered: his spear entered at the giant's hip-joint and came out through his chest. The Blue Bull reared bellowing; Külçoro swung his axe with both hands and split that single-horned head down the middle. Then, in defiance of his seven days' hunger, he hoisted Madıkan's vast carcass into the air on the point of his spear; the armies saw it, and the armies fell to their knees. Under the toppling weight Surkoyon's back would have broken;

they say that in that instant the spirit of the Ala-Too leaned toward the horse, that Akkula's shadow became a harness, that a white doe came and set her shoulder to his haunch.

On the morning of victory Semetey stood before the captives. Tens of thousands of heads were bowed; what remained of Capan, what was unbroken of the Mançu, the bewildered of the Kazak — all of them drew breath in the shadow of a single sword. The swords were waiting; the command came otherwise.

— Give them their weapons, give them their provisions, and let them go. Hunger strikes the man who goes hungry, and the road strikes the man who goes unarmed; I shall not strike. The vengeance of the Kirghiz is taken upon a man, not upon a herd.

The Kazaks were settled at Almatı, on the broad pastures of the Sarı-Arka; and young Ümütöy was made khan over them — Semetey draped the robe upon his shoulders with his own hand. For Kerimbay alone no sword was raised and no word was spoken; no word was needed. The weight of his guilt was worse than the weight of a hundred armies; one night he ground blue vitriol with a pestle, stirred it into his ayran, and drank. In the morning they found him in his gray yurt, his face turned to the wall. They say that even the earth was loath to receive the traitor.

The return to Talas was joyful; but joy on the steppe is like a guest — it stays no longer than three days. One evening a rider in a warrior's garb came to the gate of the ordo; when the helmet came off, a woman's hair spilled down over the shoulders. It was Kardıgaç — Manas's own sister. Her face was ashen, her lips were cracked.

— Semetey, my foal, she said, in the Betpak desert there has arisen a Türkmen ruler they call the One-Eye; his name is Madıköl, his eye is single, his teeth are accustomed to the flesh of men. He has set that eye upon me; he has sent word: "If she will not come to be my bride, I shall dip my hand in her blood." Were my brother alive, would such a word ever have been spoken?

Semetey took no one with him; neither Külçoro nor Kançoro. — An aunt's honor is her nephew's own burden, he said, and a burden is not divided. Alone he mounted, alone he rode. On the stone-hardened flat of the Betpak the One-Eye met him; his laughter echoed across the desert, and that single eye rolled red. It did not last long: Semetey drove Sırnayza through the giant's girdle and tore that vast body from its saddle, whirled it once in the air, whirled it twice, and on the third whirl dashed it against a black rock. The rock split; the giant never stirred again.

From the giant's tent a woman came out; her belly was at her nose, her eyes were full of tears. Semetey's hand had moved to the hilt of his sword when Kardıgaç, arriving, caught his arm.

— Do not cut her down, she said. What she carries in her womb bears no guilt. From the hand that raises a sword against a woman, no good comes to a man.

Semetey returned the sword to its sheath and left the woman alive. When her time came, that woman bore a son; they named him Sart. Those who know, know: from that child's line, years later, a great sedition would arise against the Kirghiz. But that day no one could read the morrow; and had he read it, Semetey still would not have drawn back his hand — mercy was at once the crown and the wound of his line.

Then came the turn of the oldest of knots. From Beecin, from Konurbay, word of tribute arrived: a caravan laden with gold would be delivered on the banks of the Amur. Bakay took the ingots in his hand, tested them against his teeth, and knit his brows.

— This is not gold; it is copper dipped in gilt. Konurbay sends not tribute but a trap.

So it was. At the meeting on the Amur's bank, the Kalmak archers in ambush moved too soon and the game recoiled upon its makers; Konurbay spurred his Algara into the icy water and made to flee. The river foamed, the ice broke, the horse swam. In that instant Külçoro whirled above his head, three times, the horsehair lasso left him by his father Almambet; and the lasso settled upon Konurbay's neck like a debt forty years due. He hauled him from the water and laid him out on the bank. Konurbay straightened; ice hung from his wet beard; in his eyes there was neither fear nor remorse, only an old, cold hatred.

— Strike, he said, son of Almambet the turncoat. I struck down Manas, I struck down Almambet, I struck down Çubak. Let my blood be your feast.

Semetey looked down from his horse; his voice mastered the roar of the river.

— Külçoro! Your father's vengeance is your right. Take it.

Külçoro raised the sword; and as he raised it, his father's face passed before his eyes — the face he had never seen, the face he knew only from Bakay's words and from Kanıkey's lament. The sword fell once. A reckoning forty years old was written in a crimson line upon the icy water of the Amur, and then it flowed away. No war-cry was raised, no shout of joy; such a vengeance has no joy, only a weight — and that weight lifted, in that same moment, from the shoulders of all three heroes. The Kalmaks, left leaderless, scattered into

the depths of the Kañgay; at the gate of Beecin, the throne that had waited for Konurbay stood empty.

✦ ✦ ✦

But Konurbay, before his death, had let flow his last venom. While the heroes were on the Amur, Uusañgen, whom he had secretly dispatched, had fallen with a numerous host upon Sır Korgon, emptied the granaries, driven off the herds, and trampled the felt of the ordo. No fighting man had remained in Talas — save one: Bakay's only son, nineteen-year-old Baytaylak.

Baytaylak did what befitted his father's name. Gathering seventy braves behind him, he went after the plunder-caravan; he struck by night, took back the caravan, turned the herds homeward. But on the return road Uusañgen's main force hemmed him into a narrow defile. Three days Baytaylak fought; three days he loosed arrows, three days he swung the sword. On the fourth day, his shield shattered, his horse fallen, the strength gone from his knees, Uusañgen's sword came down, and that young head was parted from its body.

When the news touched Talas, Bakay spoke no word; he went into his tent and drew the door shut. For three days and three nights only a lament was heard from within, and they say the mountains could not bear that lament; the snows of the Ala-Too melted before their season, the Kürpüldök ran turbid, and the birds did not alight in that valley that year. "My foal, my only foal," the old man was saying, "I have lived a hundred years and have not had my fill; how had you yours at nineteen? Who will console the mother whose white milk you drank; who will ride the colt you saddled? I buried Manas and endured; I found Semetey and rejoiced; who will find me one to take your place, Baytaylak? The snow on the mountain melts, the salt lake settles clear; the grief for a son neither melts nor settles." On the fourth day the door opened; the Bakay who stepped over the threshold had hair a shade whiter than when he entered, and a back bowed a span lower. But his eye was dry now; he had buried his mourning within himself and heaped stone upon it.

The mourning had not yet filled its forty days when the enemy's arrow whistled again. Uusañgen had fled, and had taken with him Kococaş, the master-elder of the Kalmak archers — that Kococaş whose arrow pierced forty layers of felt and passed in and out through the eye of a bird in flight. One morning, as Semetey was mounting before the

ordo, that whistle of death came from behind the hills. The arrow had been sent for Semetey's very breast; but they say the hand of the blessed child Baabedin came between, and an unseen palm turned the arrow from its path. The arrow buried itself in Taybuurul's foreleg; the bone cracked, and that noble tulpar gave such a bellow that Talas trembled.

No one could divine where the ambush lay. Then Ayçürök — daughter of Akun Khan, the swan-born bride — went into her white tent, put on her swan-plumage, and rose into the sky. Three times she circled above Talas; on the third she tilted her wing toward a certain crag: there lay the ambush. Külçoro leapt to his horse; Kococaş loosed three arrows, and all three Külçoro broke in the air with his spear, and he gave him no chance at a fourth — three arrows from his own bow found the archer's throat, his chest, his brow. Then he caught Uusañgen in flight; crying Baytaylak's name, he drove his spear through the traitor's back. The vengeance was complete; but vengeance does not bring back the dead — it only cauterizes the wound.

Bakay carried his grief for his son by making it balm for the wounded. Whoever's arm was broken, he bound it; whoever's heart was broken, he mended it; last of all he bent over Taybuurul's leg, set the fracture in its place, sealed it over with molten gold, and bound it. — The horse is a man's wings, he said; to a man whose wings are broken, the very sky grows narrow.

In those days another report came: a Kalmak strongman named Cubatay, seeking vengeance for his brothers Uuşan and Uusañgen, had crossed the border and was crushing all who stood before him with a great club hewn from a plane tree. The first to go out against him was Camgırçı, a hundred and thirty years old. They told the elder, "Sit; you have lived your years." He would not listen.

— To die in one's bed is the business of slaves, he said; a true man dies on the road. And besides, I have one more account to settle with this world.

The account was his own son: Şaymambet, the traitor who had guided the enemy and trampled his father's name. When Camgırçı reached Cubatay's camp, he found his son first; he did not let him flee, he took him by the collar, he looked into his eyes — and then with his own hands he closed upon that traitorous throat. "I brought you into the world," he said, "and I take you out of it; let God judge us both as He knows best." Then he shouldered his plane-tree weapon and planted himself before Cubatay. Two ancient powers, two ages, collided; but Cubatay's club came down first. Camgırçı toppled, horse

and all, like a great tree struck by lightning; the gray earth gathered him in with his horse, with his weapon, with his name of a hundred and thirty years.

Külçoro took the vengeance upon himself. By the old custom they fought in turns: first the arrow — Cubatay's arrows Külçoro caught between his fingers, while his own arrows died upon the Kalmak's shield; then the bow — each braced his bow against his waist and broke the other's; then the sword, then the spear — the shields flew apart in showers of sparks. At the last Külçoro seized the great axe, edgeless, blunt and heavy as raw flame; he swung it once, swung it twice, and on the third swing Cubatay's days were filled. That evening Külçoro, without consulting Semetey, had a letter written to the Kalmak beys: "Ride no more upon this face of the Ala-Too; if you ride, let your blood be upon your own heads." The seal of that letter held unbroken for half a century; for fifty years not a single Kalmak rider crossed those passes.

Alas, the bitterest blood came not from a foreign land but from kin. Kökçö's son Ümütöy — that young man upon whom Semetey had draped the khan's robe — one day remembered his father's old death; evil counselors whispered in his ear, "Demand the blood-price." His mother Agerkeç pleaded: "Semetey gave you bread, gave you a throne; the blood-feud is a blind man's staff — do not take it up." Wise Altınkan pleaded: "Kirghiz and Kazak are the two handles of one cauldron; do not tear off a handle." Ümütöy heeded neither; with five thousand riders he came down upon Keñ-Kol.

Semetey sought peace; he sent gifts, he sent sweet words. He set Bakay as intermediary; in the midst of Keñ-Kol the elder clung to the young khan's rein: — Son, he said, your father Kökçö and Manas ate from one cauldron; he who washes blood with blood cannot wash his own hand. Turn back; we will give you horses, we will give you gold, we will give you our hearts. Ümütöy trampled the gift, drove off the envoy, and let an insult fall upon the old man's beard. Then custom spoke: the ordered duel of spears. The first stroke belonged to the guest; Ümütöy's spear broke upon Külçoro's shield. The turn came to Külçoro; the young hero paused a moment, looked at him as if to say, "Turn back, brother" — Ümütöy did not turn. The spear flew true; Ümütöy folded over his horse's mane and did not rise again. Five thousand Kazaks bowed their heads; no one drew a sword, for custom had found its place, and where custom stands, vengeance may not speak.

Kanıkey, that dignified mother, shed tears over the Kazak dead; with her own hands she cut the shrouds, with her own tongue she spoke the prayers. The Kazak people were

sent home with horses and gold, with cloth and kumis, with oaths of friendship. Yet on the day of the farewell Kançoro bent to Semetey's ear:

— My khan, he said, mother Agerkeç has lost her son; the portion of consolation must be heavy if her heart is to heal. Give her Taybuurul; his leg is lamed, he will never again serve you fully — and the gift of such a tulpar will quench the ember in the Kazak heart.

Semetey pondered; his mercy again weighed heavier, and he gave Taybuurul to Agerkeç. When his halter passed into a stranger's hand, the tulpar turned his head three times toward Talas and neighed three times; the old women who heard that neighing drew their headscarves over their faces. Bakay was far away that day; had he been there, perhaps he would have stayed his hand. For afterward all tongues said the same thing: the going of Taybuurul was the coming of Semetey's appointed hour.

✦ ✦ ✦

Black intent takes root in darkness. Çaçıkey, fallen from favor — the woman Semetey had once taken and then turned his face from — and Kançoro, whose eye was on the khanship, drank the same poison night after night: hatred. The two joined hands in secret and sent letter upon letter to Han Kıyaz, son of Toltoy. The letters were sealed with heavy oaths; Kançoro wrote, "I will deliver Semetey to you unarmed — the throne of Talas for me, your vengeance for you"; Kıyaz wrote, "On the fifteenth of the moon I shall be there with my army; if I break my word, let my blood lie unavenged upon the ground." An oath is kept in a blessed mouth; in a traitor's mouth it is only a lock, and it opens the door from within.

Kançoro left the ordo, saying he rode out to scout; in a hidden valley he sat knee to knee with Kıyaz, and instead of kumis they drank treachery. When he returned, his face was brighter than ever; the first sign of treason is a smile without cause.

In those days Kanıkey dreamed a dream. She saw the waters of Talas flowing backward; she saw the door of Manas's tomb standing open to its full width, and black smoke pouring out of it; she saw Akkelte masterless, Sırnayza broken, Surkoyon without a saddle. She saw a white falcon, its wing broken, falling into the hollow of a black crag; and forty doves spreading their wings above it. She woke drenched in sweat; the cold of those nights when

she had fled from Buhara with an infant filled her marrow once again. In the morning she came to her son's threshold:

— My foal, do not leave the ordo today. My dream was black; a mother's dream is a letter from God.

Ayçürök came too; those swan-gazing eyes were brimming with tears.

— My lord, she said, last night in my dream my wing was broken. Do not go. Do not go to the tomb, do not go to the hunt, do not go anywhere.

But Kançoro was there, and his tongue was sweeter than honey.

— My khan, he said, how long is it since you visited your father's tomb? You made a vow; you were to set the cauldron boiling. Does a true man fear his mother's dream, his wife's tears? Does the son of Manas fear?

The vein of valor was at once Semetey's strength and his breach. He kissed his mother's hand, dried Ayçürök's tears with her own headscarf: — Do not weep, he said; I will go to my father's tomb and pay my vow, and by evening I will return. Many a word is given on the steppe which the giver keeps but the day does not. He mounted; Kançoro and a few close men fell in behind him. Above Keñ-Kol, before his father's hidden tomb, the votive cauldron was set. While the cauldron boiled, Kançoro picked from the ground a divining-stone big as a fist and weighed it in his palm.

— My khan, he said, laughing, let us play the old game: whoever lifts this stone above his head with one hand, they say, has his wishes granted. But strictly by the rite: no weapons, no armor. For him who carries iron, the omen does not hold.

Semetey laughed; this was the game of his boyhood. He took Akkelte from his shoulder; Kançoro held it. He was about to drive Sırnayza into the ground; Kançoro said, "Let me hold it," and held it. He unfastened his armor; Kançoro folded it and laid it across his own saddle. Surkoyon's rein, too, "lest he shy," was given to one of the men — and that man was Kançoro's. Then Semetey gripped the stone and raised it one-handed above his head — and in the instant he raised it, the votive cauldron, untouched by any hand, turned over; the boiling water ran out upon the earth, and the fire went dark. Had Bakay been there he would have read that sign; Bakay was far away.

Semetey turned and saw Kançoro's face; in that face there was no longer milk-brotherhood, no longer fellowship. Kançoro had slung Akkelte on his own shoulder and

clamped Sırnayza against his own flank; and the venom within him, the venom hoarded for years, he spewed out all at once:

— O Semetey! My father Çubak was left in the shadow of your father Manas; I was left in yours. Külçoro you called the rose, and me the thorn; him you called your own, and me the stepchild. Take back your shadow, and your throne with it! Kıyaz! Where are you!

From the mouth of the valley poured the army of the moon's fifteenth day. Semetey was unarmed, unhorsed, alone; still he did not flee — the son of Manas did not flee. With his bare fist he took the first rider from his saddle and broke the spear of the second. But Kançoro's spear entered through his back; Kıyaz's axe came down upon his shoulder. The hero sank to his knees; and as he sank, they say, his face was turned toward Talas.

And then — here the voice of every manasçı who tells it falls to a hush — Semetey's body vanished. When Kıyaz bent down to take his head, he found upon the earth neither blood nor body; a white smoke rose, a horse's neigh was heard, the sound of a wing passed by. Some say the kayberen took him; some say the forty çilten, those forty unseen saints, hid him beneath their wings and bore him away to their black cavern beyond the mountains. He whose corpse is not seen is not called dead; from that day on, none arose to say of Semetey "he died" — they said "he became a mystery."

When Külçoro received the news, he rode to the place alone; he arrived, but the deed was done. He fought in the midst of a hundred riders; his horse fell, his sword broke, and at the last a lasso thrown from behind dashed him to the earth. Kıyaz did not kill him — he did worse: he had the sinews of his shoulder-blades cut. The son of Almambet, that hero who carried in his two hands the blessing of two fathers, fell captive, his arm and wing broken. Against the army descending upon Talas, old Sarı Han would have made a stand; him too they took not in open battle but by guile — they lured him into a pit-trap covered over with brushwood, and at the pit's edge they shot him with the ball of Akkelte, the gun left by Manas. The blessed weapon, for the first time, was made a partner in the blood of its own masters.

Then the golden ordo of Talas was trampled. The felts were torn, the cauldrons overturned, the herds driven off; the black of mourning fell upon Kanıkey's white hair, and the ash of the hearths Çıyırdı had founded was scattered to the sky. Ayçürök, with a trust in her womb — a secret no one yet knew, a secret she nursed in her own heart — was carried out of Talas among the captives, on the croup of Kıyaz's horse. She turned and looked once

at the Ala-Too; the swans migrate when autumn comes, but they migrate meaning to return.

The wailing of the Kara Kirghiz echoed that night from mountain to mountain. Bakay, at the threshold of the ruined ordo, lifted his hands to the sky:

— O Creator! You took Manas, and we endured; You took Baytaylak, and we endured; You have made Semetey a mystery, and this too we shall endure. But do not put out this hearth. Leave one spark; one spark is enough — in the ashes of the Kirghiz, fire sleeps, sleeps and does not die.

The spark, in that very hour, was beating in the womb of a bride carried away toward the enemy's tent.

BOOK III

SEYTEK

The Line Made Whole

CHAPTER 34

The Lion Born in the Enemy's Tent

— ❖ —

Winter came down upon Ceti-Özön through all seven gorges of the seven valleys at once; all night the snow piled soundlessly upon the felt domes of the Cediger encampments, and when morning came the smoke rising from the chimneys of the gray yurts stood in the white sky like white columns. In Kıyaz's ordo the fires roared, meat boiled in the cauldrons, the kumis skins passed from hand to hand; but in one corner of that crowded tent, behind silk curtains, Ayçürök, daughter of Akun Han, sat alone, her palm pressed to her belly, listening to the life within her. The smoke of the sack of Talas had not yet left her eyes. How many months had passed since Semetey vanished, since the storm of the Kürpüldök swallowed everything, she did not count; one thing only she counted: the trust she carried in her womb, the seed of three or four months left her by Semetey, growing day by day, stirring night by night.

The road from Talas to this place had been a road watered with tears. On the night of the raid the ordo had burned, the herds had been driven off, the felts torn to pieces; they had set Ayçürök on a horse like plunder-goods and brought her to Ceti-Özön. Not once on the road had the woman wept, not once had she pleaded; only at night, at the halting-places, she had laid her hand on her belly and whispered: live, and the rest will be found. Kıyaz had taken her as spoils — Kıyaz son of Bagış, khan of the Cediger, a thick-necked, bloody-eyed, rough-spoken man. Taken her he had, but he had not been able to lay a hand on her. Ayçürök had her magic; in the wrist of a woman of peri blood there was an unseen power, in her gaze a coldness that nailed a man where he stood. Whenever the khan drew near the curtain, something flashed in the woman's eyes, the strength went out of the khan's knees, and he turned back. And at night Çürök would put on her white swan-plumage, slip out through the smoke-hole, and wander the snowy skies; from beneath her wings she would look down on Talas, see the ruined ordo, the scattered homeland, and return weeping. No one knew of this; only Karaçaç knew, Karaçaç daughter of Karahan, the one true friend she had found within her captivity.

The months chased one another. In the days when the snow melted and the steppe began to stir, Ayçürök's waist grew heavy, and that distant, dreaming light of childbirth came into her face. It was then that the worm entered Kıyaz. He would sit alone in his tent, tipping back bowl after bowl of kumis, and think: this woman never came to me, never entered my bed; whose seed, then, is in her womb? Semetey's. My enemy's. From the lion's seed a lion is born; what lies in swaddling today girds on a sword tomorrow; and he who girds on a sword asks after his father's blood.

He summoned old Kutu. Kutu, the white-beard of the Cediger, a cunning, honey-tongued man, bowed double before the khan, listened, stroked his beard, and then said this:

— My khan, your alarm is needless. A woman's burden may come into the world even at twelve months; who keeps count of moons? Go out and declare: this child is my own son, begotten in my own bed. Proclaim it before the people, slaughter ninety head of livestock, give a feast. Will a child counted as your own son draw the sword against you when he is grown? The people believe what you tell them; the people were created to believe the word of the khan.

Kıyaz approved this counsel outwardly, nodded, and robed Kutu in a robe of honor. But inwardly he was laying another plan; between the inside and the outside of khans there

stand nine ranges of mountains. That night he sent out his men and had seven crones gathered from the most hidden corners of the camps; all seven of witch-stock, all seven with hands practiced in cutting the birth-cord, all seven with eyes that widened at the sight of gold. Before them he poured ingots, poured gold, poured cloth; then from his breast he drew seven razors, all seven steeped in dragon's venom, all seven glazed with the "silent" poison — a poison that neither burns nor stings the place it cuts, and kills the dying child without a cry.

— If the one born is a girl, she is my daughter, said the khan; kiss her brow and wrap her in swaddling. If it is a boy... cut his cord with this razor. The poison will know the rest. If any of you makes a sound, I will cut out her tongue myself.

The seven crones slipped the seven razors into their bosoms, all seven bowed to the ground, all seven melted into the darkness.

But the darkness too has ears. That night, behind the treasure-tent, drawing water at the well-head, Karaçaç overheard the whispering of two of the witches; they were speaking of razors, of poison, of the khan, and giggling under their breath. The pail dropped from Karaçaç's hand and clattered at the bottom of the well; the girl left the pail, gathered up her skirts, ran skipping through the mud of the snowmelt, and came breathless to Ayçürök's curtain.

— Çürök, she said, dear Çürök, the day you give birth is the day of your death. The khan has given seven poisoned razors to seven witches; if a boy is born, he will go when his cord is cut. It is the silent poison, they say; the child will go out without a cry.

Ayçürök's face did not change; the daughters of the peri do not let fear show upon the face. She only laid her hand on her belly and made a promise to the life within, a promise that she alone heard. Then she took Karaçaç's hand:

— It is well that you exist, she said. Go now, sleep in peace. The witch's spell works upon the witch.

The pangs of birth came toward a leaden dawn. The seven crones, unsummoned, appeared of their own accord at the door; they came in, settled by the hearth, and seven pairs of eyes fixed themselves on Ayçürök's waist. Ayçürök raised herself on the childbed, turned her sweat-drenched face toward them, and looked once — only once. With that look a wind passed through the tent; a veil fell over the seven pairs of eyes of the seven crones, their world went dark, their hands flailed in emptiness. Ayçürök signed to Karaçaç;

the girl drew the seven razors one by one from the witches' bosoms, carried them to the bottomless well at the far end of the courtyard, and let all seven go at once. The razors fell turning and turning into the dark; the silent poison went looking for its voice at the bottom of the well.

— Our eyes, our eyes! moaned the crones; and Ayçürök offered them kumis with a sweet tongue: — Drink, she said, drink and your eyes will open. In the kumis was poison left by Kanıkey — a mother-in-law's legacy, provision for a black day. The seven crones drained the seven bowls, all seven crumpled where they sat, and the breath of all seven was cut off at the hearthside. Karaçaç and Ayçürök's faithful women raked out the ashes of the hearth, deepened the hollow, buried the seven witches side by side, drew the ash back over them, and lit the fire anew. The fire did not ask what lay beneath it; the fire went on boiling meat for the khan's table.

And as the dawn star rose, as the silver light of Çolpan seeped in through the smoke-hole, the child came into the world. It was a boy. His voice, even in his first cry, rang out full as the neighing of a colt. The midwives washed him, wrapped him in swaddling, and laid him in Ayçürök's arms; the woman looked into the child's face and her heart split in two: the brow was Semetey, the eyes were Semetey, the breadth of the forehead was Semetey; it was as if the vanished hero had come back again, made small.

The news flew to the khan: a son is born to you! Kıyaz entered the tent, the crowd parted, the khan reached down to the swaddling. He took the child in his arms; took him, yes — but the swaddling grew heavy in his hands as a gravestone, his arms buckled, cold sweat burst from his brow. He looked into the face: Semetey was looking at him out of the swaddling, his enemy was looking at him, the man he had thought dead was looking at him. The khan's eyes went dark with rage. He snatched up the clawed black stone that stood by the hearthstones and raised it over the swaddling:

— Enemy seed! Before the serpent's whelp grows into a dragon...

The stone could not come down. A hand fastened on the khan's wrist like a steel shackle. It was Ayçürök; no one had seen how she rose from the childbed, no one had understood how she girded the dagger Ak tinte at her waist. She twisted the khan's wrist; the stone fell, and the boards of the tent floor cracked.

— Son of Bagış, said Ayçürök — her voice was low, but everyone in the tent heard it; if you touch one hair of that child, I will bring my father Akun Han's army down upon your head. Kalday's numberless soldiers, Alabek's iron-clad men stand behind me; I will put on

my swan-plumage, cover seventy days' journey in a single night, and set all seven hosts at your gate at once. I will make Ceti-Özön too narrow for you; I will wipe the name of the Cediger from the face of the earth. If you crush before the people the child you proclaimed before the people as your own son, will anyone remain to call you khan?

Kıyaz was cornered; the hundreds of eyes of the crowd were upon him, and the lie Kutu had counseled had tangled about his own feet. He went pale, went purple, then burst into a coarse laugh:

— I was testing your mettle, woman! I said, let me see whether you have borne a lion or a hare. A lion it is! And what should my son be, if not a lion? Prepare the feast! Slaughter ninety head! Let great and small of the Cediger assemble, and let my son be given a name!

Ninety head were slaughtered, the cauldrons were set up, the feast lasted nine days. For nine days the camps of the Cediger streamed to the ordo; horse-races were run, strongmen locked in wrestling, kumis poured like a flood. Yet there was a strangeness within the feast; everyone ate, drank, laughed, and still watched the khan out of the corner of the eye; the khan's smile was like a sword's scabbard, and everyone could more or less guess what it hid. But when the time came for the naming, hands and feet drew back and tongues were tied. Everyone knew whose seed the child was; everyone knew the hatred in the khan's heart. He who gave an auspicious name risked his head, and he who gave an inauspicious one no less; not a mouth opened. The white-beards looked at the ground, the strongmen looked into their kumis bowls, the women looked at one another.

At noon, when the sun stood at its very peak, a dervish in a tattered cloak slipped out of the crowd; no one saw where he had come from, no one knew what horse he had dismounted. His white beard spilled to his chest, his staff was knotted, his feet were in rough sandals; but there was something in his walk before which the crowd parted of itself. The dervish came to the head of the swaddling and stroked the child's brow three times; at each of the three strokings he smiled. Then he raised his voice; and the voice seemed to come not from an old man's chest but from the sky:

— Let me number this child's seven forefathers; listen. From Karahan came Cakıp; from Cakıp was born the lion Manas, master of the Ala-Too, refuge of the Kirghiz — Manas. From Manas came Semetey, nursling of Kanıkey, hope of Talas — Semetey. And from Semetey this one was born; born beneath the white swan's wing, born in the enemy's tent. Let his name be Seytek! Let his line run on, let his stock be known; let his name be

Seytek, and let what stands behind him be made fast! May the forty çilten be his companions, and Kıdır his protector!

While the people thundered "Seytek! Seytek!" no one ever saw the dervish again; where he had stood, a noon heat shimmered, a wind stirred — that was all. The white-beards told it afterward under oath: that dervish was no dervish; he was Kıdır himself, Hızır who shows himself to the sons of men at the hour of noon. Kıyaz sat at the head of the feast, smiling through clenched teeth; and what passed within him, none knew but the seven witches buried beneath the hearth.

✦ ✦ ✦

The years flowed like the waters of Ceti-Özön; they neither halted nor turned back. Ayçürök raised Seytek in the white palace with its steel gates; she guarded him from the evil eye, guarded him from the evil word, guarded him from the sevenfold stranger. She hung an amulet at his neck and had prayers read over him; at night, while the child slept, she did not sleep, but kept watch at his head; a mother's heart, for thirteen years, did not beat one night in vain. Kıyaz, for his part, ground his teeth as he watched the child grow; but he could not show them. There was the fear of Çürök in him, the fear of Akun Han, and the fear too of that day when the stone had grown heavy in his hand; since that day the khan had not been able to raise a hand against the child.

The child grew; they did not say a month has passed, they said a year has passed. He became a boy who tore his swaddling in the cradle, felled a ram at three, shot the bow at seven; and as the palace's steel gate grew too narrow for him, Ayçürök's heart both swelled and tightened. It swelled, because the older the boy grew the more he resembled Semetey; it tightened, because the more he resembled him, the darker grew the khan's eye. Seytek entered his thirteenth year; where he set his foot, no grass would grow again. When he wrestled the braves of the Cediger, he brought their backs to the ground; when he shot, his arrow drilled through whatever it passed; when he mounted, the horse understood the very speech of his knees. There was something inside the boy: an ache whose name he did not know, an anger whose source he did not know. When he asked whom he took after, they told him, "You are the khan's son"; but he saw the coldness in the khan's eye, he sensed the hidden mourning in his mother's, and the accounts did not balance.

One day he rode out hunting alone on the empty steppe. The sky was high, the grass knee-deep, the larks shrilling above his head. Far off, on the spine of a hill, a mighty rider appeared; a man built like a mountain, on a horse like an elephant. Seytek's young blood leapt; he bent his bow and spurred his horse:

— Halt, rider! You are my first quarry; give me your name or give me your life!

The rider halted, turned, and looked long at the boy; and as he looked, something melted in that vast face, and the eyes of that man of rock grew wet.

— Ah, my Semetey, he said, and his voice was like the voice of a flood echoing in a mountain gorge; ah, my lion, cast from the very mold... Child, lower your bow. I am not your quarry; I am your father's comrade. They call me Kara döö; I ate Semetey's bread, and I swung the sword at his back.

— My father is Kıyaz Han, said Seytek; but the words rang false even in his own ears.

— Kıyaz? Kara döö dismounted and spat on the ground. Kıyaz is your father's murderer, child. Your father is Semetey; Semetey son of Manas, master of Talas. He was brought down by Kıyaz and by the traitor from among our own, Kançoro. Your mother Ayçürök fell to these lands as plunder while she carried you in her womb. Your father's own companion, Külçoro son of Almambet, his two shoulder-blades gouged out, is a slave in the hands of forty herdsmen; great Bakay groans in captivity with his white beard; your great mother Kanıkey has been made a bondwoman; Akbala was taken by force. You are a lion's cub raised in the enemy's tent; your milk is white, your heart is white, but the hands around you are black.

Seytek turned to stone upon his horse. The steppe wheeled about his head; the thirteen years of ache, all the nameless anger, found in a single instant a name, a place, an owner. The bow slid from his hand; he dismounted and fell upon the old giant's chest; whether he wept, or swore an oath, or both at once, none knew but the steppe.

Kara döö gripped the boy's shoulder:

— Do not weep; the lion's cub pours its tears inward. Now listen. Külçoro's shoulder-blades are hollowed out; one man alone knows the cure: in the parts of Küncüt, among the caravans, there is a master they call Kızılsart, who puts life into the dead. I go to seek him; it may take six months, it may take seven, but I will find him and bring him. You go to your mother and tell her in secret: let the prayers be made ready; and let the zülfikar sword, the arrow-proof kaftan, and the horse Tootoru be wrung from Kıyaz by sleight of hand. Not

by force — by the sweet tongue; a khan's lock is his pride, and the khan whose pride is stroked opens his treasury. I leave Külçoro in your trust, child; he was your father's right wing, and he shall be yours.

The giant mounted his elephant and glided away south, toward the caravan roads. When Seytek rode back, he was no longer the child who had ridden out to hunt; he returned to the palace a man who heard in his veins the roar of the blood of Manas. He entered his mother's curtained chamber, knelt, and said a single thing:

— Mother, I know now who I am.

Ayçürök looked into her son's eyes; she understood that the day she had awaited for thirteen years had come. She did not weep; the daughters of the peri do not let joy show upon the face either. She pressed her son's head to her breast, kissed his hair, then heard out Kara döö's charge; and from that day forward, at the khan's table, her tongue was honey and her mind was a sword.

✦ ✦ ✦

In those years, on the far side of Ceti-Özön, on the downs where the forty herdsmen camped, Külçoro — once the falcon-eyed companion — was dragging out his days. Taken captive on the night of Kançoro's treachery, his two shoulder-blades gouged out with the knife, his wings broken; his arms could lift no sword, his shoulders could draw no bow. He was in the hands of Karagul — Bagış's son by a lesser wife, Karagul the cruel, chief of the herdsmen; by day they made him haul wood and tan hides, and at night, at the kumis tables, they made him dance under the whip, jeering, "Dance like a Kalmuk." The son of Almambet, the wolf of the Beecin roads, the lightning of Talas — there were nights now when he knelt and ate from one trough with the dogs. At night he would gaze at the stars and think of Talas; think of mother Kanıkey's hands smelling of dough, of Bakay's words by the hearth, of the hoofbeats of the horses he and Semetey had ridden side by side. As he thought, his hollowed shoulders ached; as they ached, he thought. He wished to die; death comes coy to the enslaved.

His one friend was a young shepherd they called Bozbala; a kind-hearted, close-mouthed orphan. One evening Bozbala crouched down beside Külçoro behind the sheep-pen and lowered his voice:

— Çoro aga, word has come from the ordo. The lady they call Ayçürök bore a boy-child years ago; they say Hızır named him. Seytek, they call him. He is thirteen now; he throws the braves of the Cediger at wrestling, and he knows the wolf and the bird alike. The people whisper that he is Semetey's seed.

Külçoro's head rose slowly; the eyes that for years had looked at the ground fixed themselves that night, for the first time, on the stars.

— Say it again, he said. Say the name again.

— Seytek, aga. Seytek, son of Semetey.

A spark fell into Külçoro's dead hearth; the spark found the ember, the ember became flame. That night he did not sleep; that night, for the first time, he did not feel the ache of his hollowed shoulder-blades. When morning came he planted himself before Karagul:

— Give me leave for seven days. I have a dead kinsman at the ordo; I will pour kumis for his spirit.

— Does a slave have dead kinsmen? laughed Karagul.

— If you do not give it, said Külçoro, and he raised his eyes; and in those eyes something burned such that Karagul's laughter died in his throat; if you do not give it, then some night, with these hollowed shoulders, I will break the pole of your tent; you will lie beneath it. No one can stand before a man who has embraced death, Karagul; I died long ago.

Karagul gave the seven days' leave; whether he was glad to be rid of him or afraid, he himself did not know. There was an old white-gray mare from Külçoro's youth who still knew him; she carried him — and the mare walked softly, as if she knew whose burden was on her back. In three of the seven days they came to Kıyaz's ordo.

The khan saw him before his tent, and knew him. Semetey's companion; the last bough of the fallen plane tree. Kıyaz's old fears stirred; he snatched up his moon-axe, and with a single blow laid low the exhausted man who came dragging himself along; he drove his knee into his back and set his sword to his neck:

— Is it you, Külçoro? How good of the head that is to be cut off to come here on its own feet!

The sword rose; it did not fall. Through the door came a whirlwind; the whirlwind's name was Ayçürök. She struck the khan's shoulder such a blow that the great Kıyaz staggered two steps and the sword flew from his hand.

— Son of Bagış, said Ayçürök, and the scorn in her voice was sharper than any sword; I thought you a mountain; it seems you are no bigger than a knucklebone. You raise the sword against a spent man whose arms are bound and whose wings are broken; is this the khanship of the Cediger? This man is my guest; whoever touches my guest must kill me first. Try, if you will.

Kıyaz did not try. He had not tried since the day of the stone; and this day was not the day for it either. Ayçürök took Külçoro by the arm and brought him to the white palace; she washed his wounds, fed him on broth boiled forty times over, spread forty layers of felt beneath him. Then from the bottom of her chest she brought out the trust she had kept for twelve years: Semetey's arrow-proof kaftan and his blue-steel helmet. She laid the kaftan on the worn hero's shoulders and set the helmet on his head:

— Let your wing be broken, Çoro; your heart is whole. Eat, drink, come back to life. There is one in this palace who waits for you; for thirteen years, not even knowing it himself, he has waited.

✦ ✦ ✦

The next morning, in a sunlit chamber of the white palace, Külçoro lifted his head, and in the doorway stood a youth. And Külçoro's heart beat in his breast like a fluttering bird: before him stood Semetey; the thirteen-year-old Semetey, the Semetey of the days when they raced their horses in Talas; the same brow, the same eyes, the same bearing. The hero, heedless of his hollowed shoulders, made to rise; his knees failed him; the youth ran and caught him; two strangers, two of one blood, fell into each other's arms; the old companion's tears wetted the young lion's collar.

— My child, said Külçoro, and his voice came in pieces; you have brought your father's face back to me. Twelve years I hauled wood, twelve years I took the whip; I did not die. Do you know why I did not die? I did not die so that I might see this day. Sit, and listen; listen, so that you may know who you are down to the root.

And he told him. He told it long; three days and three nights he told it; and as he told, his burden lightened, and as he told, the youth's face turned to stone. He told of Kanıkey: — The great mother suckled us both together; Kançoro she took to her left breast, me to her right. When Kançoro sucked, black blood came from the left breast; when I sucked,

white milk from the right. Kanıkey said that day: "This black blood will one day devour us." And devour us it did; we grew, and both of us became companions to Semetey; I gave my life for him, and he took a life — his lord's. Kançoro made common cause with Kıyaz and drew your father into the trap; on the banks of the Kürpüldök, in that black storm... I did not see your father die with my own eyes, my child; some say he died, some say he became a mystery; but in Talas it was Kançoro who sat upon his throne — he made great Bakay herd camels like a slave, he made mother Kanıkey a bondwoman. I protested; they gouged out my shoulder-blades. Twelve years I hauled wood in the hands of forty herdsmen. I wanted greatly to live, and for one day only: to see your face.

Seytek rose to his feet. He looked at the embers of the hearth, then at the smoke-hole opening to the sky, then struck his knee to the ground and swore:

— Let the spirit of my forefather Manas bear witness, let the blood of my father Semetey bear witness! I will bring down Kıyaz, and Kançoro too. I will deliver great Bakay and the great mother Kanıkey from captivity; I will gather up the scattered Kirghiz and make them whole; and you, Külçoro my uncle, I will seat as khan in Talas. If I fail in this, let me die and be no Seytek; let my name wither, let my trace be wiped away!

Ayçürök, behind the curtain, heard this oath; heard it, and that night she opened her chests. She brought out the arrow-proof kaftan she had worked at day and night for twelve years, strengthened with golden thread, and the yellow trousers, and the blue-steel helmet; one she girded upon her son, one upon Külçoro. In every stitch of those kaftans there was a prayer, in every golden thread a night without sleep; the woman clothed twelve years of her life upon the shoulders of two warriors. — May the forty çilten be your companions, she said; may Hızır İlyas go before you, the gray tiger behind you, the Zümrüdüanka above you for shade. A mother's blessing is stronger than an arrow-proof kaftan; when the two are joined, they pierce rock. And do not forget this: in the khan's tent, the tongue goes before the sword. Be patient; the cock that crows too early has its head cut off.

The kaftans were girded on; now came the first step. Seytek went to the khan's tent, his tongue smeared with honey:

— Han ata, he said; I have come to my thirteenth year and have never seen the herds, never seen the open country. Give me your leave to go to the herds; let me count the head of your stock and see how your herdsmen fare. Should a khan's son not know the khan's wealth?

The words "Han ata" stroked Kıyaz's pride; he had his suspicions, but what could come of a thirteen-year-old boy? — Go then, he said; are you not my own son? My wealth is your wealth. Külçoro too they gave him for company; no one even asked; a broken-winged slave — whose concern was he?

The two of them, early one morning, crushing the frost-rimed grass underfoot, came to the herds. Karagul saw them coming from afar and swung his whip:

— Well now! The runaway slave come back — and the khan's milk-lamb with him! Off your horse, Külçoro; last night's dance was left unfinished.

Seytek urged his horse forward. When his voice came, it was not the voice of thirteen years; it was the voice of an avalanche breaking loose from the gorges of the Ala-Too:

— Manas!

The steppe knew that war-cry of old; the grasses lay flat, the herds shuddered, the blood drained from Karagul's face. Seytek came down upon him; at the first blow Karagul's whip-arm fell, at the second the man himself; the tyrant's blood mingled with the earth he had whipped. The herdsmen snatched at their swords; would that they had not. The young lion plunged among them like a wolf; no arrow bit into his kaftan, no sword pierced his helmet; half of the forty herdsmen were cut down that day, and the other half knelt and begged for quarter. Seytek undid with his own hand the hobble on Bozbala's feet:

— The friend of my uncle Külçoro is my friend. Rise; from this day no one will make you dance again.

And Külçoro, that day, became sultan over the very herds he had slaved among for twelve years; the herdsmen bowed before him, and the herds moved at his whistle. As evening fell the companion broke Karagul's whip in two and threw it in the fire; he stood a long while before the flames, and said nothing to anyone. The first vengeance had been taken; the first blood had been spilled on the road of the father's blood. When a messenger ran to the ordo and laid the whole matter before the khan, Kıyaz squeezed his kumis bowl until the bowl cracked; but he made no sound. He could not accuse before the people the child he had called his own son; if he accused him, his thirteen-year lie would spill from his own mouth. The khan sensed, for the first time, that he himself sat inside the trap he had built.

Meanwhile Kara döö had beaten the roads for six months; he had crossed Küncüt, chased the caravan tracks all the way to Bağdat, and found the caravan-master Kızılsart

there. He gave him Ayçürök's letter; Kızılsart read it, learned that Semetey had been brought down, and wetted his beard with his tears; for there had once been the bond of bread and salt between them. He poured his mourning into the road: he took sixty strongmen with him, loaded six thousand red pomegranates, loaded treasure, lashed his chests of medicines onto camels, and came to Ceti-Özön, to the valley of Çuk-Terek.

Kızılsart tried his most healing herbs first; he applied salves from Hindustan, fed him the electuaries of Buhara, poured out forty kinds of remedy; nothing availed. They stripped Külçoro, and the master looked again at the hollowed shoulders; he looked, and shook his head: — No salve will serve here, he said; the bone has been gouged out and flesh has filled its place; for bone, only the like of bone will serve. There was a blue-gray hound left from Semetey, a hound that ate the lion's portion and throttled wolves; they drew out its sinew, and Kızılsart cut that sinew to the exact mold of the hollowed shoulder-blades, set it in their place, and smeared the red medicine over it forty times. Before forty days had passed, blood ran again in Külçoro's shoulders; before forty days were full, strength came back to his arms; and when I say strength, it was not the old strength, but a strength overflowing it many times over. To test it, the companion tore a young plane tree up by the roots; then he was ashamed, and planted it back. The sixty strongmen stood up to wrestle him; all sixty saw the sky from their backs.

One evening, as the fires of Çuk-Terek burned, Seytek said:

— Uncle, tell me of my father's campaigns. I grew up in darkness; bring my past into the light. My heart knows whose son I am — the man whose sword I shall gird on; let my mind know it too.

Külçoro told him. He told of Manas: of the exile in the Altay, of Cakıp's white-gray mare, of the return to the Ala-Too; of Akkula's running, of the oath of the forty companions, of the thronging multitude at Kökötöy's memorial feast; of the Great Campaign, of the walls of Beecin, of the blood of his father Almambet spilled there. He told of Semetey's return from Buhara to Talas, of Taytoru's race, of the swan-chase for Ayçürök, of his battles with Konurbay; and as he told, those around the fire drew closer, and the sixty strongmen knelt and listened like children. Then his voice darkened: — Now Kançoro sits in Talas, he said; great Bakay, his white beard on his breast, herds camels — a man not buried as the dead are, not counted as the living are; and mother Kanıkey, mother of khans, wears a bondwoman's apron. Those around the fire fell silent; the sixty strongmen looked at the ground; Kara döö's huge fists clenched upon his knees.

Seytek rose to his feet. The firelight had turned his face to red copper; his eyes, that night, were not the eyes of a boy at the hunt, but of a khan who has drawn his bow.

— Once I swore an oath; let it now be twice, he said. Until I take my father's vengeance, let life be forbidden to me. I will find Kıyaz in his own tent, and Kançoro on my father's throne. My claw is whetted, my wing is made whole; from here on, there is only the road.

Above, in the black sky of Çuk-Terek, a swan glided; her white wings silvered in the starlight, and she circled three times over the camp. It was Ayçürök; she was listening from the sky to her son's oath, and weighing the stratagem that would bring the khan to his knees on the morrow — weighing, one by one, with what sweet words she would wring from him the zülfikar sword, the arrow-proof garb, the horse Tootoru. Kıyaz slept soundly in his tent that night; not knowing that he had suckled and raised his own end, taking the swan's wingbeats for the wind, he slept.

CHAPTER 35

The Swan's Ruse and the End of Kiyaz

— ❖ —

Talas, in those years, was not a name but a wound. When it was spoken, the eyes of the old grew clouded, women turned their faces to the felt walls, and children fell silent. Since Semetey had vanished into mystery, that paradise of a valley beyond the Ala-Too lay in the traitor's hand; Kançoro sat in the white ordo, while Kıyaz, in Ceti-Özön, had taken the swan-born Ayçürök by force into his bed and grew fat in the shadow of a stolen khanate. But the steppe has a long memory. However many times the snow may fall, the seed beneath the earth does not forget. Thirteen years passed; the seed stirred.

That morning, in the hidden camp of the horse-herders, Seytek had ordered ninety ketmens set in a row, one behind the other. The night before, by the fire, he had tested Külçoro's wrist, had seen the old strength stirring in that arm, and a worm of doubt had entered him: was this strength real, or a veil drawn over the eyes of hope? The young man would not believe without proof; such was the line of Manas — it weighed words on the scale and knew a man only in the field. In the grey of dawn he had commanded the herders'

boys, had gathered every ketmen the camp possessed, and had set ninety of them in a single line. Ninety irons, ninety black mouths, drawn up in a rank facing the sunrise, the crimson flame of daybreak playing upon them. Külçoro took up his bow. That hero whose shoulder blades had once been gouged out at Kançoro's command, who had been scorned twelve years as a slave, who had carried horse dung and lapped swill from a broken bowl, now stood straight as a spear. He drew the string; the muscle of his arm swelled like stone, the bow groaned, the birchwood cracked.

— O spirit of Manas, he said, without raising his voice. O Semetey, my elder brother, wherever you are, hear me. Whether the arm that was a slave's has become an arm again, whether the eye that was dimmed has become an eye again — now you shall see.

The arrow flew like lightning loosed from the string. It pierced the first ketmen and passed through; it pierced the tenth and passed through; it pierced the fiftieth and passed through; it shattered the heart of the ninetieth ketmen and buried itself in the black rock behind. For a moment the whole camp was silent; then a cry broke loose like water through a bursting dam. Old herders embraced one another; young men hurled their kalpaks into the sky.

— In my youth I could pierce eighty ketmens, said Külçoro, and for the first time since those black years his voice laughed. I thought slavery had made me small. It seems my God was whetting me and keeping me in reserve. O Seytek, my lion, the hour of vengeance has come. Kıyaz's days are numbered.

That day a feast was raised; cauldrons were hung, kumis went round bowl after bowl, and the eldest of the herders stroked his white beard and gave his blessing: "May the spirit of Manas spread its wings over you; may your slave days depart with the winter, may your warrior days come with the summer." The manes of the war horses were braided, their tails knotted; swords spoke upon the whetstone, arrowheads were oiled, new strings were fitted to the bows. But the roar of the feast did not reach Ceti-Özön; the mountains stood sentinel that it should not, the streams kept silence, and the mouths of the herders were locked.

In Ceti-Özön, meanwhile, Ayçürök was tying the patience of twelve years into its final knot. Daughter of Akun Khan, that stately woman of the swans' lineage, she had been, since Semetey vanished, a captive in Kıyaz's tent — a spoil of war, a silent mourning. Dragged away with Seytek six months in her womb, she had borne her son in the enemy's hands and raised him with his true name whispered nightly into his ear, this child

presented to the world as "Kıyaz's son." And for twelve years, when all others slept, she had lit a tallow lamp at the foot of the felt wall and sewn: a nine-buttoned kaftan no arrow could pierce; a kalpak strengthened within by steel wire; a kandagay of the hide of the mountain goat of Köy-Kap, that no sword could cut. How many needles had broken, how many fingers had bled, how many nights the lamp's soot had burned her eyes — she had not counted. By day she sat silent at Kıyaz's table; by night she spoke with her needle; every stitch was a wish, every knot a curse. She had buried it all in her white saddlebag, heaped wool upon it, and let no one suspect. A woman's patience is like a well; God alone knows its depth.

That evening she had a fire lit in her tent, had the fattest sheep slaughtered, filled the raki into the silver bowl with her own hand, and received Kıyaz as her guest. The khan came and settled himself in the seat of honor; reflecting that for the first time in twelve years this woman had set a table for him, he swelled with pride. He drank, he flushed, he loosened; and when he began to boast of the breadth of his khanate, the number of his herds, the fame of his sword, Ayçürök filled the bowl once more and bowed her head slightly:

— My khan, she said. Your son Seytek is with the herds; for months I have not seen his face. A mother's heart cannot bear it. Give me leave to go and bring him. But the herds are far and the road is stony; give me Tootoru.

The bowl in Kıyaz's hand stopped in the air. His face first emptied with astonishment, then darkened with rage.

— Tootoru? My tulpar? Since when does a woman mount a horse! I have forty herdsmen; I shall command them, and they will carry the boy home in their arms. What would you do with a horse? Or... — his eyes narrowed; the wolf within him showed its teeth — or would you flee to Talas, swan? Are you weaving sedition against me? Would you take the boy who is no blood of mine and deliver me to my enemies?

Ayçürök rose. When she rose, the tent pole itself seemed to grow short; all the white wrath of the swan lineage came into her face.

— Kıyaz, she said, and her voice was like a sword in its sheath. Twelve years I have eaten your bread, twelve years I have sat in silence, twelve years I have called your camp my camp. Is this the recompense? You call me a runaway; you call me a schemer. Then listen. In my chest lies my swan shirt. I shall put it on and rise into the sky; and when the wind of my wing touches Ceti-Özön, not one stone of it shall remain upon another. I shall raise the

nation of my father Akun Khan; the warriors of the seven climes will set foot in the stirrup and grind this khanate of yours to dust beneath their horses' hooves. You put the swan in a cage — I endured it; call the swan a slave, and I endure no more. Give the horse, and I bring my son; refuse it, and endure what follows.

Kıyaz's raki-reddened face turned to ash. He knew this woman's father, he knew her lineage; and he knew the swan shirt was no fable — the old men still told how Semetey had chased this woman across the sky when she was a swan. On one side lay his pride, on the other the armies of Akun Khan; he set them on the scale, and his pride weighed light. He swallowed the fear swelling in his throat, laughed — or tried to; the laugh hung crooked.

— I jested, my katun, I jested. You are the daughter of Akun Khan; shall a horse be begrudged you?

And the khan went to the stable with his own hand, groomed Tootoru with his own hand, set the silver-inlaid saddle with his own hand, tightened the girth with his own hand. Nor was that all; he drew from his chest the priceless sky-blue kaftan and laid it on Ayçürök's shoulders with his own hand. On the steppe they say the hand of fear is more generous than the hand of love.

Ayçürök set foot in the stirrup and mounted Tootoru. And in that instant came what no one expected: the tulpar turned its head, bared its white teeth, and spoke in human tongue, clear and plain, in a voice all before the tent could hear:

— O Kıyaz! I laugh at those who call you khan. Only a slave serves under a true man; but you saddled me at a woman's word, and tightened my girth out of fear of a woman. You are a woman's slave, Kıyaz — a woman's slave!

Kıyaz turned to stone where he stood; among the retainers some looked at the ground, some swallowed, and from one throat a strangled laugh escaped. Ayçürök's heart leapt into her mouth — once this tongued tulpar began to speak, it might tell where the herds lay hidden, and of Külçoro, and of the secret of twelve years. She tore the coral bead from the end of her hair, breathed a charm over it, and struck it full upon Tootoru's brow:

— You who found a tongue — be tongueless!

The tulpar shuddered; its mouth closed; no human word came from it again. Kıyaz, humiliated, wrapped his shame in bustle, begged pardon, said "may your road be open, my katun," held her stirrup, and escorted her to the edge of the camp. But hatred had settled into Tootoru's heart. The moment the camp passed from sight, the tulpar flattened its ears,

took the bit in its teeth, and began to run like a mad thing — not toward the road but toward the cliffs; not toward the plain but toward the precipice. Grinding against the teeth of the rocks, foaming at the mouth, it ran and ran through the night, to dash its mistress upon the stones, to drown her in the deep lakes, to hurl her from the sheer bluffs.

✦ ✦ ✦

Ayçürök felt the cold wind of death upon her cheeks; she felt it, but she did not cry out. The swan lineage knows the precipice. She lay flat against the mane, closed her eyes, and began to recite the charm handed down from her forebears; once she recited it, three times, seven times. When the words were spent, Tootoru's mad gallop went out like fire fallen into water. The tulpar dropped first to a trot, then to a walk; its neck bent, its step grew heavy; it became slower than a sheep, meeker than a lamb, silent as new-fallen snow. Ayçürök stroked its sweated neck:

— I know your grudge, she said. But my grudge is older than yours, and my road is longer. Walk.

They reached the camp as dawn was breaking. The camp was awake; the dogs wagged their tails without barking, as though they knew who came without needing the scent. And there, in the red light of the lamp, Ayçürök saw a thing she had not seen in thirteen years: Külçoro on his feet, upright, his shoulders broad as in the old days, in his eyes the fire of the old days. The dark giant had brought the great healer Kızılsart from far-off lands; that white-bearded elder, ancestral friend of the house of Manas, had mended the gouged bone with herbs, with prayer, with the grace of his right hand, and made the broken hero whole. Kızılsart stood to one side, hands tucked into his sleeves, with the silence of a master whose work is done; "to lend a hand to the line of Manas is a debt we owe our fathers," was all he had said, and no other word had been drawn from him. Ayçürök slid from the horse before she could dismount; Külçoro ran and fell at her knees; Seytek was caught between them, and the three of them pressed the lamentation of three days and three nights into a single breath and wept together. Whose tears fell on whose collar, none could tell; the grief was shared, the joy was shared, and the two were mingled like kumis and milk.

Then Ayçürök took her son's face into her palms. The hour had come; she could carry the word in her womb no longer.

— Seytek, she said. My child. You are not the son of Kıyaz.

The boy did not move; only his pupils widened. There had been within him for years a crookedness that had no name: the way every morsel eaten at Kıyaz's table had scraped his throat, the way his tongue had stumbled on the word "father," the way he had searched his own face in the mirror for one line of Kıyaz and never found it. Now, with a single word, that crookedness came straight.

— Your father is Semetey; Semetey, son of Manas. Your grandfather is Manas, head of the steppe; your grandmother is Kanıkey, greatest of grandmothers. Talas is your homeland; the Ala-Too is your mountain. Listen now: I will tell it once, I will weep once, and then I will never look back again.

And she told it. She threw another log on the hearth, and in the face of the flame the old days came alive; she told it. She told of the black day that fell upon Talas: how Kançoro trampled the right of bread and salt and made common cause with Kıyaz; how the forty companions were scattered; how Külçoro was taken alive and his bone gouged out; how Semetey vanished one black morning, and because none had seen his body, those whose eyes still watched the road called him only "lost"; how she herself, six months with child, was dragged by the hair and given to Kıyaz as spoil; how Kanıkey, that stately lady, was made a slave in the traitor's hands at Talas. Here, for the first time, her voice cracked; but it did not break.

Seytek listened; thirteen years settled on his shoulders in a single night, and that night the boy became a man. He was looking at the fire but he did not see the fire; before his eyes stood a father he had never seen, a homeland he had never seen, a grandmother he had never seen, and all three expected something of him.

— His body was never found, said Ayçürök at last. And where no body is found, there is hope. But hope is the business of afterward; first the debt is paid. The debt's name is Kıyaz.

The white saddlebag was opened. The hidden labor of twelve years was spread out in the lamplight: the nine-buttoned arrow-proof kaftan, the steel-veined kalpak, the kandagay of goat hide. Külçoro drew on the kandagay, put on the kaftan, and as he fastened the buttons one by one he counted a year at every button; at nine he stopped, and the remaining three years he buttoned into his heart. Then he turned his face toward Talas and set his knee upon the ground:

— O Manas, my father! Great is your spirit, long is your shadow. Today I set out. If I do not take Kıyaz's head, if I do not drink his blood, let my name be Külçoro no more; let me die a slave, and let no stone be set upon my grave. My vow is a vow, my oath an oath!

And girding on his moon-axe, he went out to Kıyaz's road, to the crossing of the nine ways.

That night Kıyaz could not sleep. First he blamed the heat, then the raki, then the pillow; he rose, paced before the ordo, looked at the stars — and the stars looked back at him, coldly. He lay down; sleep brought dreams, and every dream a nightmare: he saw a black bird perched upon the smoke-ring of his ordo; he saw the horse beneath him melt into black water; he saw his own head resting on his own knee, gazing up at him. He woke drenched in sweat and summoned the dream-readers; some came and swallowed their tongues, some pleaded sickness and did not come, some muttered "God grant it bodes well" and looked for a hole to flee through. Kıyaz flew into a fury:

— Cowards! Does a khan die of a dream? The sword kills the khan — and the sword's mother has not yet borne it!

And yielding to his rage, taking no retainer, alone, he mounted Kılkürön, the spoil of Talas, and rode out in the black of dawn. On the steppe they say: the khan whose hour has come saddles his horse with his own hand.

At the crossing of the nine ways, a dark shape came out of the morning mist. Kıyaz reined in and narrowed his eyes — and at first did not believe what he saw: before him, in his arrow-proof kaftan, the moon-axe on his shoulder, stood the slave whose shoulder blades had been gouged out — Külçoro; and he stood not like a slave, but like a mountain.

— You... you were dead, Kıyaz stammered.

— The slave died, said Külçoro. Külçoro rose again.

Kıyaz snatched his lance and drove his heels into his horse's flanks; the lance came down like lightning, the moon-axe rose faster than lightning: the steel point was cloven in two in the air, and the two halves fell to either side. And in that moment Kılkürön — the horse of Talas, the horse of the old days — knew the scent that filled its nostrils. It was the scent of Talas, the scent of its own side. The tulpar neighed, reared, spun once on its hind legs, and flinging Kıyaz from the saddle like a sack, crossed over behind Külçoro, to its own side, and stood still.

— Even your horse knew, said Külçoro. Come down and fight.

The two warriors fought on foot. One day they fought, and the swords grew blunt as if beaten on barren stone; two days they fought, and the swords broke from their hilts; three days they fought, and the axes flew from their hafts, and the maces were battered shapeless; four days they fought, and the armor fell away in shreds and lay strewn on the ground like felt — only Ayçürök's nine-buttoned kaftan yielded not a single stitch; five days they fought and closed in wrestling, and the earth of the crossroads was churned knee-deep, its dust a pillar to the sky; six days and six nights they fought, and there was neither victor nor vanquished, and they neither drank water nor drew breath. Kıyaz's strength was thick and his hatred thick; but Külçoro had his twelve years — every year became a wrist, every humiliation a fist, every swallow drunk from the broken bowl a tooth.

At dawn on the seventh day, hoofbeats sounded from the crest of the hill. Seytek had come; in his hand, drawn from the bottom of Ayçürök's chest, the six-fold forged sword of his grandfather. The boy dismounted and bared the blade; the steel wiped the dawn across its face. When Kıyaz saw that six-fold forging, the strength went out of his knees; in the eyes of the child he had called "my son" for thirteen years he read his own death, and he threw himself upon the ground:

— Seytek! My child! I took you as my own, I raised you! I carried you in my arms, I fed you at my table! Will you cut me down with the same tongue that called me father?

— You did not raise me, said Seytek, and the voice of thirteen years fell like stone. My mother's patience raised me. You stole my father's name, you stole my mother's bed, you stole my grandmother's homeland. If that is raising, then thus I pay my debt.

The six-fold forged sword rose once, fell once. Kıyaz's head parted from his body and dropped into the dust of the crossroads; his black blood ran down all nine of the nine roads. Külçoro drew near, unsheathed his dagger Börütil, dipped it in the blackest of the blood, and drank — one swallow for the hunger of twelve years, one swallow for the gouged bone, one swallow for the swill drunk from the broken bowl. He drank, and when he straightened there was neither joy nor sorrow in his face; only the stilled silence of a long pain that had ceased.

The news fell upon Ceti-Özön like a thunderbolt. Some rejoiced, some feared, some did both at once; when a khan dies, the heart of a nation splits in two. While the lords of the Cediger looked at one another, not knowing which way to turn, Seytek strode into the square; his blood was boiling, his sword had not yet found its sheath.

— Let us root out the Cediger, he said. As the khan was, so is the nation.

Külçoro laid his hand on the boy's shoulder; the dark giant let his shadow fall from the other side.

— My lion, said Külçoro. The swine was the khan; what is the flock's crime? The crowd knows its khan for what he is, and no more. Those who bowed to Kıyaz will bow to you; be just, and the nation will take you for a father. The sword conquers; justice holds.

And the dark giant added in his deep voice:

— I too grew up among this people, my lion. The shepherd's crime is herding sheep; the woman's crime is kneading dough. Save your sword for those who deserve it; a sword raised against the undeserving cuts its own master.

Seytek's breathing slowed and settled; the sword found its sheath. Kıyaz's treasure chests were dragged into the square and their lids broken open; gold, silver ingots, cloth, livestock — all of it was dealt out to the widow, the orphan, the barefoot, the freed captive. An old woman who had lain hungry for years looked and looked at the ingot placed in her palm and wept; "so the khan's wealth was the people's wealth all along," she said, "and we never knew." The drums thundered, the people streamed in from all four quarters, and in the square, upon white felt, a golden crown was set on the head of Kara Döö, son of Kutubiy, and he was raised khan over the Cediger. A feast was laid; the cauldrons boiled, the komuzes sang, and the first night of forty days and forty nights of rejoicing began.

But at the very height of the feast Seytek stood, and with the sharp, unforgiving honesty of youth he looked into the faces of his elders:

— Here we eat meat, we drink kumis, we set crowns on heads. Good, very well. But who remains in Talas? My grandmother Kanıkey is a slave at the traitor's door, barefoot in the snow; Bakay, my grandsire, is broken-backed under torture. While we laugh here, they groan there. If the meat of this feast passes down your throats, it does not pass down mine.

The words fell upon the square like live coals; the komuzes fell silent, the bowls came down, the fat of the meat congealed on their fingers. No one could meet the boy's eye. Külçoro bowed his head; under the weight of a true word his shoulders bent as six days of battle had never bent them.

✦ ✦ ✦

The next morning Seytek swore an oath upon the spirit of Manas, upon the name of Semetey, upon the white milk of Kanıkey: before the year was out he would reach Talas, free his grandmother enslaved by Kançoro, and avenge Bakay, whose back had been broken under Karınbay's torment; and if he did not, let him not be counted a man, let him never mount a horse, let him never wear a kalpak. Külçoro gave the command: seven hundred red camels were made to kneel, and their humps were loaded with gold, with ingots, with silk; the people freed from captivity struck their yurts and formed the great migration. This time the migration was not mourning; feasts were held along the way, games were played, songs were sung. On the main road children played with the camel bells, and young girls learned anew the old songs that had been forbidden to every mouth for years; freedom, more than anything, was the return of the voice. The caravan moved toward Talas; at its head Seytek, at his side Külçoro, and in its midst Ayçürök with her white saddlebag.

On the third day of the road, near a caravan halt, a neigh burst out of the unseen; such a neigh that the mountains echoed it, the herds started, the horses pricked their ears. Out of the cloud of dust came a charger with broken chain-links at its neck, whip scars on its croup, its mane matted to felt — and it ran straight to Seytek. Külçoro's knees gave way:

— Buurul... It is Buurul! My brother Semetey's Buurul!

It was Buurul. The charger that had carried Semetey over the roads of Beecin, that had never fled before Konurbay, that had raced the wind and put the wind to shame; the Buurul given away as blood-price for Ümötöy, and since that day degraded in the caravan-master's hands to a beast of burden, beaten, starved, its tulpar nature all but driven out of memory; it had found its master's scent in the flesh of his son, had broken its chain and come. The horse laid its head against Seytek's chest, and tears poured from its great eyes; it wept like a human being, like a grieving mother. And who could look on it and not weep: Külçoro sobbed, Ayçürök covered her face, even the drivers of the seven hundred camels were drowned in tears. This was what they meant by a father's relic; a wound on four legs.

Into the midst of the weeping fell the sound of hooves. Karasart the caravan-master came on in a storm of dust, sixty wrestler-drivers at his back; he swung his whip toward Buurul:

— That horse is our property! Bought with blood-price, fed with money. Give up the horse, boy, or pay for it with your blood!

— The scars on its croup tell how you fed it, said Seytek. This horse is my father's horse. Let him who owns it come and take it.

His voice was low; but beneath the low voice ran a rage like a flood beneath rock.

Karasart bared his sword and charged. The moon-axe turned once; the dawn that came down upon the caravan-master's crown split him from the saddle in two and laid him on the earth. The sixty wrestlers fell on him as one; Seytek bared Coybolot, and with all the weight of the line of Manas upon his thirteen-year-old shoulder he turned and turned: some he cut from their horses, some he planted in the ground; of the sixty he broke all sixty, and not one turned back to carry the news. As he wiped his sword on the grass, even his breathing was steady.

Külçoro had thrown his arms around Buurul's neck and was breathing in its mane, as though breathing in his brother. But the horse, at the warmest moment of that embrace, suddenly lifted its head and pricked its ears toward the distance; in its eyes burned a summons beyond the reach of human understanding. It neighed — this time not with grief but with a secret — and shaking itself free, it began to run; neither Seytek's voice stopped it nor Külçoro's pleading. It struck for the mountain, crossed the pass, became a white speck on the snowy summits, and then even that was erased. It was gone; where it went, God alone knew — and perhaps also its master, hidden in his black cave. Külçoro gazed long after it; then, to himself, barely audible, he murmured: "A horse does not run for nothing. A horse goes where its master is." No one understood the words that night; the day of their understanding had not yet come.

At the halt, Külçoro laid a hand on Seytek's saddle:

— Let us go to Talas together, my lion. Kançoro is a treacherous cur; alone...

— Alone, said Seytek. Even the way he cut off the words was his father's voice. My grandfather Manas entered Talas with his whole line; my father Semetey entered with a single horse. I too will enter alone. The taste of vengeance cannot be shared, father.

Külçoro did not speak again; he knew the boy would not listen, and he knew that the one who would not listen was right. That night Ayçürök took her son into her tent, sat him at her knee, and set out her words one by one, like stringing beads:

— In Talas, in Kançoro's hands, are three sacred trusts; all three come down from your grandfather Manas, and all three are yours by right. One is Akolpok — the white kaftan no arrow can pierce; strike its wearer with arrows in forty places, and not a hair of him is

harmed. One is Akkelte — the gun that fires of its own accord; it knows its master, and gives no bullet to a traitor. One is Zülfikar — the sword come down from heaven; who girds it on, girds on the shadow of his forefather. Ask these of Kançoro without battle, my child; use your tongue first, declare your right. If the traitor will not give them, then let Talas see how what is not given is taken. And seek out your grandsire Bakay: if he lives, free him, and press the dust of his feet to your eyes; if he has died, wash him with your own hands, bury him with your own hands, and mark his grave well. And I have one word more; let it hang from your ear like an earring: six days. If you do not return in six days — my heart is not six-fold forged steel, my child; I shall die before my hour.

Seytek pressed his mother's hand to his forehead and breathed in her scent three times. Ayçürök put a day's provisions in her son's saddlebag and a pinch of salt in his breast — "the salt of the homeland knows its own in the homeland," she said — and though she had a thousand words yet to say, she swallowed them all and only looked. A mother's gaze is like a prayer; it does not come to words, it clings to the back, it travels the whole road. The boy mounted his horse before the first light of dawn.

The passes of Çatkal were deep in snow; the wind cut like a sword on the summits, and in places the snow struck the horse's belly. Seytek did not feel the cold; the fire within him was the fire of the pass, and it did not go out. He crossed one ridge, he crossed two, he crossed three; beyond every ridge he hoped for his homeland, and every time another ridge rose before him. The tulpar floundered through and over. And when he reached the crest of the sixth ridge, the world opened suddenly before him: Talas. A thousand shades of green spread across the valley; the water of the Keñ-Kol curled like a silver whip; the white summits of the Ala-Too stood guard over the valley like an ordo propped against the sky. Seytek knew his never-seen homeland at first sight; his blood knew it, his bone knew it. He dismounted, took up a handful of earth, pressed it to his face, and wept with all the orphanhood of thirteen years; no one saw, only the mountains saw, and mountains tell no one.

But Talas hid its wound beneath its beauty. As he descended into the valley, the camps grew silent; most of the hearths sent up no smoke, and the smoke of those that did rose thin; children scattered at the sight of a stranger, and even the dogs barked timidly. Kançoro's white ordo glittered in the distance; its glitter was the glitter of what had been stripped from the back of a starving people. And behind a sheepfold, he saw: two maddened calves straining and jerking in opposite directions, and between them, bound by

her arms to the calves, an old woman in sackcloth, without even sandals on her feet — flung from side to side, falling, rising, falling. Seytek's eyes went dark; he had never seen this face, and yet he knew it from every night of his mother's telling. It was Kanıkey; daughter of Temirkan, wife of Manas, greatest of grandmothers — Kançoro's slave.

Coybolot flashed twice; the heads of the two calves fell to either side, and the ropes went slack. Seytek sank to his knees and opened his arms:

— Grandmother...

But in Kanıkey's eyes there was no longer any such thing as recognition. She who had once been the pearl of Buhara, the cherished daughter of Temirkan, who had sat at Manas's knee, who had carried Semetey in his swaddling clothes out of the flames; now her hair was white felt, her back a bow, her palms callus. The years had beaten her into taking every approaching hand for an enemy; the eye that has seen no kindness takes kindness itself for a snare. The old woman straightened, raised the tether stake she snatched from the ground, and advanced upon her grandson; she struck, and struck, and struck with all the strength of her wasted arms. Seytek did not move; he neither raised his arm nor turned his face; only the tears ran down in cords. Strike, grandmother, he said within himself; strike, that I may feel in my flesh one thousandth of what you have borne; strike, that this debt may begin, at one end, to be paid.

And a little way off, behind the sheepfold, the ground trembled with a moan. The grey she-camel that had knelt there sixteen years, that had turned its face toward the qibla sixteen years, that had watched the road for its mistress sixteen years — Kanıkey's white camel — lifted its head. It saw Seytek; saw, and knew. From the camel's great black eyes the tears burst forth, in cords, in torrents; it stretched out its neck and bellowed so that the sound shivered the waters of the Keñ-Kol and touched the snows of the Ala-Too. The stake still fell, the tears still flowed; and over Talas, all the waiting of sixteen years found its voice in the bellow of a camel, and came beating at the gate of the traitor's ordo.

CHAPTER 36

The Slave Woman at the Spring and the White Dagger

— ❖ —

Where the road left Ceti-Özön and bent westward, a grey she-camel planted itself in Seytek's path. It bore neither halter nor load upon its humps; a monstrous beast, its eyes burning like embers, foam scattering from its mouth. However many times he gave way, it would not yield; the boy pulled his horse to the right, the camel turned right; he pulled left, it turned left. At the third turn Seytek shortened his rein and said within himself: what bars my road bars my fortune. His sword rose and fell like a tongue of flame; the grey camel crashed down upon the stones of the steppe, shuddered once in the swirling dust, and lay still. As the boy wiped the bloodied blade on the grass, a shiver ran through him; it was as though in that beast's body he had struck down the forerunner of all the dark powers that lay in wait along his road. He turned his horse's head toward Talas and rode on, crossing the passes, cleaving the waters.

When Talas came into view, the day had leaned into afternoon. The snowy teeth of the Ala-Too grappled with the sky, and below the slopes the grazed-out pastures lay spread like

yellowed felt. Seytek was seeing for the first time this homeland whose name he had learned not from lullabies but from Külçoro's blood-soaked tales; he saw it, and his heart ached strangely. The banks of the Keñ-Kol where his grandfather had galloped were desolate; the camps had thinned, the hearth-smoke had grown feeble. He came to the spring at the foot of the great plane tree — that ancient source whose water, they said, was healing, whose shade was abundance. As he dismounted and bent to drink, a moan reached his ear.

He looked: on the far side of the spring, an old woman in black rags had been bound among barren young bulls. The strap that dragged at her arms was wound about the animals' yoke; each time the beasts shied and bolted, the woman was dragged over the stones, and the blood seeping from her knees and elbows dripped upon the dry earth. What she wore on her back was not clothing but tatters; her whitened hair was smeared with mud. But in that face, that sunken face, Seytek saw something he could not name: a head that even in its dragging had never bowed, an ember still winking beneath the dead ash.

— Mother, said the boy, leaping from his horse; who are you, and who has yoked you to these barren bulls?

The woman raised her head with effort. Before her stood a warrior like the moon; tall as a cypress, broad of shoulder, with a familiar light in his eyes. Her heart leapt, then she almost smiled at herself: for how many years had she seen a familiar light in every rider who came, and for how many years had she been wrong every time.

— Who should I be, my child, she said; I am Kançoro Khan's slave-woman. By day I gather his dung, by night I watch his barren bulls. The beasts shy, and I am dragged; the stones eat my flesh, and no one asks. Who are you, and from what land do you come?

Seytek swallowed. Külçoro had charged him: do not reveal your name too soon; first hear the state of the homeland from its own mouth; learn who is friend and who is foe. The boy squared his chest:

— I come from the land of Hindistan; I am a khan's son. My road passed this way, and I thought to drink of this country's water. Mother, since you are a woman of this place, tell me: whose is that hill across from us, whose is that ruined orda, whose is this failing spring?

The woman struggled to rise; the strap cut her wrist, and she paid it no heed. With her hand she pointed out the hills, the ridges, the river-reaches, one by one, and at each she repeated the same words, like the refrain of a lament:

— If you ask of that Kara-Adır: ask of what it was, it was Semetey's; ask of what it is, it is Kançoro's. If you ask of that horse pasture: ask of what it was, it was Semetey's; ask of what it is, it is Kançoro's. If you ask of that ruined white palace you see, my child... Tiger Manas built it, and it passed to Semetey; now the owl roosts there, the snake makes its nest. Ask of what was, and it belonged to Semetey the brave; ask of what is, and it belongs to Kançoro the tyrant.

— And you, mother? What was your former state?

The woman's chin trembled. She was long silent; the water of the spring chattered over the stones, the bulls breathed through their nostrils.

— If you ask what I was, she said at last, in a thin voice; I was the wife of Tiger Manas. They called me Kanıkey, daughter of Temirkan; on my head the white ilek, beneath me Taytoru, before me forty slaves and forty serving-women. I bore Semetey, I raised him; on the Buhara road I carried him to safety, to Talas I brought him home. If you ask what I am now: I am Kançoro's dung-gatherer. Kıyaz struck down my son, Kançoro took my orda; white-bearded Bakay, that beloved servant of God, he made a slave, and me a drudge. Bakay, who has set his ladder against ninety years, he has dragged behind horses like a goat in the gökbörü game, and laughs. I have not died, my child. I could not die. One thing alone has bound me to this world.

— What is it, mother?

— A child remained in Ayçürök's womb, of my Semetey. When Kıyaz carried her off, her belly was at her nose. Was it a girl, was it a boy; was it born at all, or did they strangle it — I do not know. The dream I dream by night, the hope I build by day, is always that. If that child lives, I live. If that child has died, then even a shroud is too much for this dragged body.

— Do you know, my child, what it is to be a slave-woman, the woman went on, her voice creeping as over stone. You rise before the dawn; the khan's mares are milked, and you go to the dung. Your hand bleeds, no one looks; your back bends, no one holds you. Once I had forty serving-women, and if I spoke one of their names wrongly she would sulk; now no one knows my name. "Black crone," they say — "out of the way!" they say. And do you know what is hardest? At night you look at a star through the gap of the tent, and you know that somewhere beneath that star stands the tomb of Manas; and you cannot go. Your son's bones lie somewhere in the wild; and you cannot gather them. That is what slavery is: to be unable to mourn your own dead.

A fist lodged itself in Seytek's throat. He almost cried out; he bit his tongue, turned his face to the water, and drank a handful so that his voice would not tremble.

— Good tidings to you, mother, he said; I have passed through that land, and I know that news. Ayçürök bore a son. In Kıyaz's country there was a feast; ninety head of cattle were slaughtered. On the feast day there came a white-bearded dervish whom no one knew; he parted the crowd and reached the child's head. "This babe is the son of Semetey; let his name be Seytek!" he said; he gave his blessing, spoke a prayer; and when they turned to look, the dervish was gone, and none had seen his track. Whether he was Kıdır, whether he was one of the forty saints, no one ever knew.

Kanıkey's face lit and darkened by turns; she was shaken between believing and fearing.

— May your tongue be honey, my child... But do not sport with me. This heart has been seared with hope too many times; it has no strength to be seared again.

At that moment one of the bulls shied — at a fly, or at a shadow; both lunged forward at once, the strap snapped taut, and Kanıkey pitched onto her face and began to be dragged over the stones. Seytek's eyes went dark. In one bound he was there; his sword flashed twice like lightning, the heads of the two barren bulls rolled to either side, and their bodies buckled at the knees and toppled. He cut the strap, gathered the woman in his arms, and laid her by the spring, in the shade of the plane tree.

But Kanıkey, instead of giving thanks, began to beat her breast:

— Woe upon my head, what have you done! You have destroyed Kançoro's property! Now that wrathful swine will come and butcher you and me together! If you are a traveler, go your way; if you are a khan's son, return to your khanate; may the sword of such a warrior as you wither — you have brought about my death! Stranger's son, blighter of nations!

While the curses fell from her mouth like stones, a woman came running from behind the hill: Akbala, Külçoro's wife. She too, seeing the bloodied heads of the bulls, struck her hands upon her knees:

— What bringer of ruin has done this deed? Kançoro will put us all to the sword! Who are you, young man, and what devil has led you?

Seytek stood still. He looked into the two women's eyes, grown huge with fear; in that moment he understood how exile, bondage, and the tyrant teach a human being to start at

its own shadow, and he could bear it no longer. He drove his sword into the earth and knelt before Kanıkey:

— Do not curse me, great mother; do not curse your own lamb. Hindistan was a lie, the khan's son a veil. The babe whom Ayçürök bore and the dervish named — I am he: I am your own lamb, Seytek! I am the son of Semetey, the grandson of Manas! I have entered my thirteenth year and learned my lineage; Kıyaz, who struck down my father, I laid low in his own orda, and I did not leave his blood upon the ground. Külçoro, my uncle, enslaved with his shoulder blades gouged out, I found among the slaves and brought forth; now he, with my mother Ayçürök, has loaded the spoils of Ceti-Özön and taken the road to Talas. I rode ahead to see the homeland, to find you. Half of my father's vengeance is taken; the other half hangs on Kançoro's neck. And for him too this sword will suffice!

Kanıkey stared for a time, turned to stone; then with both hands she felt the boy's face; she felt his brow, his eyebrows, his chin; her wrinkled fingers found Manas in that face, found Semetey, found her own youth. And then all the waters the years had frozen broke loose at once: Kanıkey, sobbing, threw her arms around her grandson's neck.

— My lamb! Black of my eye, crown of my heart! I have seen you before dying, I have breathed you in before dying! My burning heart has come to water; God has granted my wish, Kıdır has granted my plea! What matter that I was a slave, what matter that I was dragged; you were alive, the line has continued, the hearth has smoked!

Akbala too was weeping with one breath and laughing with the next, turning again and again to look down the roads, saying, "My Külçoro lives, my Külçoro is coming." The shade of the plane tree spread over the three of them like a wing; and the spring, for the first time in many years, heard not lamentation but the sound of joy. Seytek took his great mother's wounded hands into his palms and swore:

— Until I have settled accounts on the field of battle with Kançoro, who cut these hands with straps and smeared this hair with mud, let no one call me the son of Semetey. Until I have raised the white palace anew and made whole the heart of my grandsire Bakay, I shall not sheathe this sword.

In those same hours, far off on the Ceti-Özön road, the migration of Külçoro and Ayçürök was flowing slowly toward Talas; the camels laden, the herds in front, the hearts wounded and hopeful.

✦ ✦ ✦

Kıyaz's blood had not been left upon the ground, and over the headless people of the Cediger, by Külçoro's word, Kara Döö had been made khan; a man mighty of frame, weighty of speech, true to his oath. Külçoro had entrusted to him the land, the law, the borders, one by one, and then had taken his place at the head of the migration. The caravan was long: the standard in front, the laden camels behind, the flocks on either flank; the ingots taken from Kıyaz's treasury in chests, the slaves freed from bondage at the caravan's tail. Ayçürök rode her white ambler, her eyes fixed always on the road her son had taken.

When the first glint of the Talas water appeared, Ayçürök's reins went slack. Every ridge, every reach of river recalled to her a day: at the foot of that rock she had sat with Semetey; on that pasture the foals of Akkula's line had neighed; from that spring the grandsons of the forty companions had drunk. Now the foot of the rock was desolate, the grass of the pasture untrodden, the eye of the spring dry. The woman sank against her horse's neck:

— O my homeland, my orphaned homeland! Was your water at fault, that it dried? Was your grass at fault, that it yellowed? Your hero is gone, your spring has drawn back; Semetey's inheritance has fallen to the black snake. When I came to you as a bride, even your birds kept the law; now a khan sits where the owl roosts.

She wept; and as she wept her veil grew wet, and as it grew wet her heart grew lighter. Külçoro rode up beside her; he said nothing, and there was no need to say anything. His own eyes too had been fixed on one point all along the road: the ache in his two shoulder blades grew sharper as the mountain air hardened.

When the migration came down into the Keñ-Kol, the news became lightning and ran through the camps: Semetey's son lives, Külçoro has returned, Ayçürök has come! First they did not believe; then they climbed the hills and saw the caravan; then men and women, children and elders, the hungry and the footsore, poured out onto the roads. The Kırgız gathered, the Argın assembled; the white-bearded prayed, the young brides scattered offerings. Some vowed a sheep, some a mare; an old shepherd came leading his single goat — "for the orphan's feast," he said, his eyes wet. They lifted Seytek from his horse and carried him on their shoulders; whoever looked into the boy's face said, "The breath of Manas has touched this one," and kissed his hand and pressed it to their brow. Out of the crowd came a blind manasçı; he came leaning on the shoulders of two youths, pressed Seytek's hand to his face, and there, before the caravan's dust had even settled, without

komuz or kopuz, in his cracked voice, he began to sing: he sang Manas, he sang Akkula, he sang Semetey's return with Taytoru; and when the turn came to Seytek he stopped — "the rest of it you shall live from this day on, and I shall sing it," he said. The people who had lived for years with heads bowed under tyranny straightened in the shadow of an orphan; in one day the land grew glad, in one night the hearths multiplied. Word reached even those who had fled; some, that very week, loaded their tattered tents onto their camels and returned.

But the shadow over Talas had not lifted. Kançoro's levy was heavy: horses from the Argın, sheep from the Kırgız; the roof of him who did not give was torn down, and he who resisted met the whip. Many a camp, unable to bear the levy, had struck its tents at midnight and fled; those caught fleeing had their flocks seized and their men put in the stocks. And heaviest of all, the thing that went among the people like an open wound: the tyrant, for sport, would have old Bakay — that holy man who had been as a father to Manas, who knew the gates of both worlds — tied behind horses and dragged through the dust as men drag the goat in gökbörü. He himself meanwhile took his pleasure with Çaçıkey upon the golden throne, gazing into the foam of the kumis and laughing. Çaçıkey, Semetey's widowed wife, had gone not to her husband's avenger but to his murderer's throne.

Külçoro, as he listened to the people's condition, felt the old wound within him bleed anew. One morning he girded himself with a calm heavy as the Akolpok itself, and rode to the tyrant's orda without a single warrior at his side. Kançoro knew him from far off; knew him, and half rose from his throne, and sat again; across his face passed first the shadow of fear, then the paint of arrogance. When Külçoro crossed the threshold, the tyrant spat his curse before any greeting:

— So you live, slave! So that whimpering cur Kıyaz did not kill when I said "kill," but nursed you in his bosom! No man he — less than his own wife; his heart could not hold what his sword could cut. I should have strangled you with my own hands; this is the end of him who gives his work to another.

Külçoro stopped in the middle of the orda; his voice was low, but every word came down as though carved into the felt of the tent:

— Count, then, Kançoro, and I shall count with you. One: at Toltoy's ambush you had my brother, the lion Semetey, cut down; the lasso was thrown at your signal. Two: you took me alive and had my two shoulder blades cut and gouged; like a bird with broken

wings you gave me as a slave to Kıyaz's threshold. Three: you made the wife of Manas a gatherer of dung, you made my grandsire Bakay the goat in your game, you dried up the spring of the homeland. Each of these is a noose upon your neck, Kançoro. And yet... — Külçoro paused for a breath, and swallowed the knot in his throat — our root is one. You are the son of Çubak; your father ate from one cauldron with my father Almambet, and died beneath one banner. For their sake I set one last road before you: if you heed my word, I will bury the past in black earth; I will be your brother, I will stand at the foot of your standard, my sword will be your sword. But if you persist in your savagery, then I swear: I will gouge out your eyes and part your head from your body. Choose.

A silence fell within the orda; such a silence that the crackle of the embers on the hearth could be heard. Kançoro laughed first; the laugh was forced, the eyes uneasy. Then, half rising from his throne, he waved his hand toward the door:

— A raven with its wings plucked comes to spread its wings over me! A slave without shoulder blades comes to sell me brotherhood! Talas is mine, the throne is mine, the standard is mine. As for you... — he curled his lip and called out with a false generosity — take that Akolpok, put it on, and boast that "the khan gave me a kaftan." Go, out of my sight; set foot on my threshold again, and your head stays on my threshold.

The servants dropped that blessed armor-kaftan, the heirloom of Manas, at Külçoro's feet as one flings alms. Külçoro bent, lifted the Akolpok from the ground; he shook its dust upon his knee, kissed it, and laid it in his breast. He looked at Kançoro one last time — and in that look was neither rage nor pleading; only the reading of a sentence. He turned, went out, and mounted his horse.

The moment he was gone, Çaçıkey burst from behind the curtain; her face was chalk, her voice cracked:

— My khan, are your eyes blind, are your ears deaf? That man did not offer you brotherhood; he read you your death! The one called Külçoro will claw with his nails though his wings be broken; the one called Seytek is a tiger cub who at thirteen felled a giant of a man like Kıyaz. These two will drag your reckoning out of you in the end. They are no brothers to you — they are enemies; and of all enemies the most incurable: the enemy who has been wronged!

Kançoro drained his bowl of kumis, stroked his mustache, tried to laugh; but that night his sleep came in broken pieces, and in his dreams he saw, over and over, two headless bulls.

✦ ✦ ✦

From that day Çaçıkey's tongue never rested; she poured her poison drop by drop, night and day. She whispered it in the tyrant's bed, spoke it at his table, repeated it clutching his stirrup as he rode to the hunt:

— This one is not your brother but your enemy. Do not carry the snake in your bosom; cut off his head and hang it on the post of the orda, that all who see may take warning, and Argın and Kırgız alike renounce the worm in their hearts. And crush Seytek while he is still unformed; let him grow and he becomes a mountain, and you have not the strength to topple a mountain. I lay in Semetey's bosom; I know that breed: they do not forget, my khan. They know how to wait, and waiting, they are whetted.

In Kançoro's tent, treachery boiled like meat in the cauldron. Some days he summoned the executioner; some days there was talk of laying ambushes; but each time something stayed his hand — perhaps the people's hearts flowing toward Seytek, perhaps the look Külçoro had left in the orda that day. The tyrant covered his fear with arrogance; and the more he covered it, the more the fear grew.

Meanwhile, in the old tent by the spring, aged Kanıkey too could not quench the ember within her. She had been reunited with her grandson, true; but when night came and the felt of the tent moaned in the wind, the years advanced upon her one by one: the stones she had been dragged across, the dung she had gathered, Bakay's white beard fouled with dust, her son's body without a grave. One night Akbala thought she found her by the fire whetting a knife; she drew near and saw there was no knife — the woman was rubbing her dry palms together, murmuring to herself:

— If I could seize him by the throat... If with these two hands I could seize the tyrant by the throat. And Çaçıkey's poisoned tongue... My God, at this age give me one day's strength, one day's youth; let me take my vengeance, then take my soul.

One evening, when they sat around the fire at a halting place of the migration, the talk wound its way round to Kançoro's origins. One of the young warriors asked: from what rock had this cruel one broken, from what wolf had he been born? Kanıkey told it, gazing into the fire; for the first time her voice neither trembled nor rose:

— He broke from no rock, he was born of no wolf; and that is the bitterest part. He is the son of Çubak. Çubak, who was the soul-companion of Manas; of Akbalta's line, a lion

of a man in the ways of the heart; he fell a martyr on the Beecin campaign. When Kançoro was in swaddling clothes I took him into my arms. I took him... and my hand froze. In the look of his eye I saw an ill omen; a coldness unlike a babe's eye, a smell of blood mingled with the smell of milk. "If this child grows, he will be a snake at our hearth; let go, let me cut him down now, the sin be on my neck," I said. I reached for the knife. The whole world fell upon me: "Has the lady gone mad? Does one destroy Çubak's remembrance? Does a hand rise against a companion's orphan?" they said; they seized my wrist and took the babe from my breast. I fell silent; I gave milk, I gave food, I dressed him in kaftans. The snake we nursed grew up; grew up, and betrayed his elder brother Semetey, and took his throne, and made me — who stood to him in a mother's place — a slave-woman. They say the arrow returns to the place from which it was loosed; ah me, would that they had not held my wrist that day.

Those around the fire bowed their heads. Ayçürök did not sleep that night; her mother-in-law's words turned round and round in her ear. Toward dawn she entered Kanıkey's tent; the old woman was awake, as though she had been waiting. From beneath her bedding Kanıkey drew out something wrapped in forty-year-old felt; she opened it: a white dagger. Its hilt was white bone; its blade gleamed like milk in the moonlight.

— I had this forged, she said; in Manas's lifetime, by the master Bölökbay. He tempered it in a seven-fold bellows and folded snake venom into its edge; "where it strikes, no healing; whom it touches, no escape," he said. Many a tyrant has fallen while this went in and out of its sheath; through my slavery I hid it in my bosom, buried it in the dung heap, carried it against my skin. Take it, my daughter. My wrist is past its hour; your wrist is fresh, and your heart more burned even than mine. Semetey's blood watches you; your son's road waits for you. Take it — and when the hour comes, do not falter.

Ayçürök took the dagger in both hands; the cold bone grew warm in her palm. She spoke no word; those who come of the swan's lineage do not spend words when they swear.

✦ ✦ ✦

Then came the day that God had written. Kançoro, to display his power and to turn back with fear the people's hearts that were flowing toward Seytek, had spread a great

drinking feast in his orda; he had gathered his lords and his flatterers, taken Çaçıkey to his side, and settled himself on his golden throne. By custom, the women of the arriving migration were to come before the khan and bow; the tyrant had resolved to bring both Ayçürök and Kanıkey to their knees at his threshold, and had proclaimed it to all Talas. "Let that female they call the swan give her greeting from the ground at my threshold; let that crone they call the wife of Manas fill my bowl," he had said.

They came. Kanıkey in front, a drinking-bowl in her hand; Ayçürök behind her, head bowed, a silken cloth across her arms — and beneath the cloth, the white bone hilt. The orda was full; the smell of kumis, the smell of sweat, the smell of grease had sunk into the felt. Kançoro sprawled on his throne and laughed:

— Come forward, then! Ask what they were, and these were Semetey's wives; ask what they are, and they are Kançoro's slaves!

He laughed at his own words; his flatterers laughed with him. Ayçürök walked with bowed head; she came within three paces of the throne; two paces; one. Then the swan rose up as a swan spreads its wings. The silken cloth slid to the floor; the white dagger flashed once in the air. Kançoro's laughter died in his throat: the dagger drove in beneath his collarbone; the tyrant overturned his bowl and toppled from his golden throne onto the carpet. The flatterers froze; one or two moved to draw their swords — but in the doorway the shadow of Külçoro had already appeared, and behind that shadow stood Seytek with burning eyes. No one could stir.

Ayçürök knelt; she drew out the dagger and opened the tyrant's belly, and then that lovely, that gentle wrist became an executioner's wrist: she parted Kançoro's head from his body. The black blood spread over the carpet, and from the carpet to the earth. Then Kanıkey, forty years a slave, came forward with her bent-double body; she dipped her palm into that black blood, filled it, and drank. Ayçürök too cupped her hand, and drank. On the faces of both there was neither joy nor loathing; there was only something like the hiss of water poured upon live coals: two hearts that had burned for years were quenched, searing, in that blood. Kanıkey straightened; for the first time in many years, her back was fully upright:

— My Semetey, was all she said, looking at the sky. Did you hear, my Semetey.

They found Çaçıkey behind the throne, wrapped in the curtain, trembling. The woman first begged, then cursed, then begged again; they neither killed her nor pardoned her. Kanıkey said, "Let her blood not stain us; do not enslave her — keep her at my side; let

her look into my eyes every morning, and that will weigh on her heavier than death"; and so it was done.

The news went out through the door of the orda and swept Talas from end to end: "The wrathful swine is dead! The tyrant is fallen, the levy is lifted!" The people at first could not believe it; then they poured into the streets and out onto the pastures. No one kept count of the sacrifices slaughtered that day; a great feast was raised and lasted three days and three nights: by day horse races, wrestling, the goat-game; by night fires, songs, the voices of manasçıs singing Manas. By the dried-up spring the young brides scattered offerings; some swore by God and by all that is holy that on that very day water had begun to seep again from the spring's eye. The tyrant's granaries were thrown open; the horses, sheep, and ingots gathered by the levy were returned to their owners, and the share of the dead was given to the orphan. They dragged Kançoro's golden throne out of the orda and flung it into the square; no one sat on it, no one touched it; at last an old blacksmith came with his axe — "from this gold, bracelets can be cast for orphans," he said — and broke it to pieces.

The feast's first care was Bakay. They brought the old man with reverence — that holy body the tyrant had bloodied with his draggings; they washed his wounds with kumis and wrapped them in the warm hide of a newly slaughtered mare, and they raised a white-felt boz üy over him, saying he would be tended forty days. When Bakay opened his eyes and saw Seytek at his bedside, his cracked lips smiled:

— The scent of Manas... he said. I know that scent. Three generations I have known it. So the homeland will be restored; so I have not crawled in the dust for nothing, my child.

Seytek took the old man's dry hand between his two palms; with a rage mixed with shame he made to say, I came too late; Bakay shook his head:

— There is no such thing as too late, he said. Time is God's horse; it will not go for the whip nor stop for the halter. You came at the appointed hour. I saw Manas when I was six years old; he too came at the appointed hour.

Before the forty days were out, the white-bearded elders of Argın and Kırgız assembled, and the great ones of the nation spoke with one voice: Seytek, son of Semetey, was raised khan according to the law. They seated him on the white felt; nine times they lifted him toward the sky and set him down; "be our khan, be our wing," they said. The thirteen-year-old boy sat upright upon the felt; in the crowd he saw his great mother's eyes brimming with tears, his mother's stately face, Külçoro standing broken-winged but with

head held high, and he said within himself: if I cannot carry this burden, let those hands that were dragged across the stones never forgive me.

And just when it seemed the goal was reached, at the feast's end, a rider appeared from the land of the Cediger: Kara Döö himself. He had come, so it seemed, to give his blessing; but when Külçoro drew him aside and looked into his face, he understood that the giant carried something beneath his tongue.

— Speak, he said.

Kara Döö first had Seytek called to his side as well; then he lowered his voice:

— I heard this from Kıyaz's old huntsmen; I put them under oath, I made them tell it twice, and their words held together. Semetey did not die. Those who fell in that bloody ambush fell; but the hero Semetey was wrapped in mist and carried off by Kayıpçı — the herdsman of the vanished saints. He walks alive now in his black cave, they say; he is under enchantment, his tongue is bound; he sees no human face and speaks no human word. The huntsmen have seen smoke rising from the cave's mouth, and at night they have heard a howling from within, like a grey wolf.

Seytek's heart hammered at his chest; Külçoro's knees, those iron knees, trembled for a moment. They told Ayçürök; the swan's daughter wept with one breath, laughed with the next, and covered her face with both hands. But before the joy had even drawn breath, Kara Döö — whether from simplicity or from cunning — spoke one word more; turning to Külçoro with a smiling face:

— O çoro, he said, the man who wronged you is dead, your homeland is restored; one thing alone remains undone. By the custom of your elder brother Semetey, his widow falls to you: why do you not take Ayçürök?

The words were like a live coal dropped into the middle of the orda. Külçoro said nothing; but Seytek's boyish face turned in an instant to stone, and his hand went, unknowing, to the hilt of his sword. His mother on one side, his uncle on the other; and between those two, between the two people he had embraced only yesterday, he felt a thin crack creeping like a snake. Those around the fire fell silent; far off, the music of the feast played itself out and died.

That night Seytek did not sleep. He came out of his tent and looked at the dark teeth of the Ala-Too. Behind him, around fires sinking toward embers, the homeland slept; for the first time in many years it slept without fear. From his great mother's tent came a faint

murmuring; Kanıkey was speaking aloud, at last, the prayers she had recited inwardly through all her years among the dung. Somewhere out there, in a black cave whose name he did not know, the father whose face he had never seen was howling like a grey wolf, his tongue bound. The boy pressed his sword to his chest and swore to the stars: until he had brought his father out of that cave, until he had loosed his tongue, let no one call him khan of this land. As the dawn broke blood-red over Talas, Seytek was still gazing at the mountains.

CHAPTER 37

The Grey Wolf in the Black Cave

— ❖ —

Spring came to Talas like a face washed clean of mourning. Along the Keń-Kol the snows drew back, the foals of the herds scattered whinnying across the hills, and the smoke rising from the chimneys of the grey yurts carried no longer the scent of lament but the smell of cooking. The black days of Kançoro lay behind them; the people had pressed their faces once more to the hearth of Manas — but the one who sat at the head of that hearth was a boy whose lip had not yet known the shadow of a moustache. Seytek, thirteen years old, strained to bear the weight of the khanship that had settled upon his shoulders, and at night, whenever the muffled sobbing drifted from the tent of his mother Ayçürök, his heart twisted within him.

One evening, at the hour when the kumis skins were opened and the cauldron boiled upon the hearth, Seytek could bear it no longer. He knelt before Külçoro and pressed both hands to his breast.

— Külçoro, my elder, he said, you are the pillar of this house. My father Semetey has been gone thirteen years; there is no grave for us to weep beside, no bone of his to give to the earth. My mother Ayçürök sits a widow, shedding tears day and night. You know the custom: when a man dies, his wife falls to his brother's keeping. Take my mother, be the man of our hearth, and let me be a son to you.

The kumis bowl trembled in Külçoro's hand; his jaw, upon which no white had yet fallen, clenched tight, and his eyes burned like two coals. He set the bowl upon the ground and rose to his full height; his head reached the lattice-bindings of the tent.

— May the wind snatch those words from your mouth, Seytek! he thundered. Do you know what you are saying, my tender lamb? Ayçürök is not my brother's widow to me — she is my mother! I am the son of Almambet; my father gave his life beside Manas on the road to Beecin, and I was left an orphan in my swaddling clothes. It was Kanıkey who gathered me to her breast; one breast she gave to Semetey, the other she gave to me. One milk we drank, the two of us; in one cradle we grew, the two of us. Semetey is not an elder brother to me — he is my very soul; Ayçürök is no widow to me — she is the bride of the mother whose white milk I drank; she is my mother. Let me be a dog, let me be an infidel, let my eyes run dry and my tongue wither — if ever I look upon that door with a suitor's thought, may the wrathful spirit of Manas strike me down!

A silence like death fell upon the tent. Seytek bowed his head, crimson to the tips of his ears. Külçoro breathed hard for a time; then he took the boy's head between his two palms and kissed his brow, and his voice softened, stilled as a torrent from the mountain stills upon the plain.

— The fault is not yours, my child. You spoke the custom; I spoke the word of the heart. But know this: the man of this hearth is not yet dead. No one has seen his corpse, no one has seen his blood, no one has seen his bones. Until I have given Semetey to the earth, I will not say of him that he died. We wait. The patience of the Kırgız is longer than the mountains.

That night, before sleep took him, Seytek looked up at the stars and, for the first time, prayed within himself for his father: for the father whose face he had never once seen, whose voice he had never once heard.

That night Külçoro did not sleep either. Staring into the embers of the hearth he thought of the old days: two babes upon the knee of Kanıkey the mother, two spoons in one bowl, two riders on one colt. He thought of the day Semetey first girded on his sword;

he thought of their riding out to win Ayçürök, of the changing of horses before Konurbay. «Are you living, my lion?» he murmured toward the embers. «If you live, you are somewhere; if you are not beneath the earth, if you are not in the sky — then you are somewhere.» The embers gave no answer; but neither did they die.

In those days Kara the giant, son of Kutubiy, had been ranging for months far from the people, from mountain to mountain, under the pretext of the hunt. He was of the blood of giants; his shoulders were two men's heights across, and the horse beneath him seemed no bigger than a calf — but his heart was the heart of a child, and he was Semetey's companion-at-arms, and for thirteen years the wolf within him had howled without ceasing for his lost khan. He chased gazelle, he chased wild ass, he brought down mountain rams; he ate the meat, pressed the hides into his saddlebags, and still was not filled, and still he wandered. Winter passed, summer came; he reached the ridges of Orolmo, the rock-strewn necks of Belek.

One mid-morning, on a slope where the mist had only just peeled away, Kara the giant's horse suddenly pricked its ears, snorted, and shied backward. Kara the giant raised his head and could not believe what he saw: on the opposite ridge, upon a great rock, stood a horseman. The horse was Taybuurul — that mane, those haunches, that bearing the Creator had never fashioned twice in this world. On the rider's arm perched a white gyrfalcon; behind him a white hound panted, its tongue hanging a hand's span; and slung across his back, its barrel flashing in the sun like a naked sword, hung Akkelte. And the rider himself — those shoulders, that neck, that slight tilt of the head...

— Semetey! cried Kara the giant, and his voice filled the valley, striking from rock to rock and returning. Semetey! My khan! My grey wolf! It is I, your servant, the son of Kutubiy — it is I!

The rider turned and looked; he looked, but he did not see. His eyes were open, yet in those eyes there was neither recognition nor question; they gazed like two frozen lakes. Kara the giant leapt from his horse and began to climb the slope; stones rolled from beneath his feet, his knees bled, and still he shouted, he swore oaths, he invoked the name of Manas, he invoked the white milk of Kanıkey — the rider did not stir a hair. Then he turned Taybuurul's head and, as though the earth had split open and he were sinking into it, glided away into the darkness between the rocks. When Kara the giant caught up, he found before him the mouth of the black cave of Kayıpçı: a gate of pitch-black stone, a cold clinging to it like hoarfrost, and from within, the smell of the bottom of a well. The khan,

with his horse, his falcon, his hound, and his gun, had entered that darkness and vanished as water vanishes, leaving no trace.

Kara the giant gripped his mace and strode to the gate. One day he hammered it — the rock groaned and did not open. Two days he hammered — the mace's haft bloodied his hands, and it did not open. Three days, four days, five days he hammered; on the evening of the sixth day the iron of the mace was beaten flat, and on the morning of the seventh Kara the giant's knees gave way beneath him. He sank down before the rock and wept like a child; then he rose, wiped his tears with the back of his sleeve, and swung onto his horse.

— If the gate would not open to me, he said, it will open to Talas. It will open to the one who holds the right of milk.

And he drew the reins taut; the horse sprang forth like an arrow leaving the bow.

When he reached Talas his horse's mouth was foam and his own face was dust; before he had even left the saddle he shouted with all the voice in him:

— Glad tidings! Glad tidings, Talas! The grey wolf is not dead! Semetey lives! These eyes saw him, these ears heard the neighing of Taybuurul! Glad tidings!

The people surged like water. Women poured from the grey yurts, children darted out between the legs of the horses, old men forgot their staffs and ran. At the news Ayçürök froze for one instant; then her knees came near to failing her — but they did not fail; she gathered her dignity, had the doors of the treasury thrown wide, and scattered gold by the fistful to the poor.

— Let him only be living, she said, and let wealth's eye be put out. Let my husband live, and let me be a slave.

By the hearth, while Kara the giant caught his breath, Külçoro, pounding his fist against his knee, tore open once more that old wound; and Seytek, for the first time, heard it from beginning to end. He told of that ill-fated war with Cediger that had dragged on nine months: of the narrow gorge of Cılgındı, of that treacherous fog that had fallen for fourteen days so thick that eye could not see eye, of the armies drawn up in ranks losing one another inside the fog. He told how Kançoro had gone about two-faced in those days, how he had emptied the flanks of his khan, and how, when the fog lifted, only the wind blew where Semetey had been.

— We found no corpse, said Külçoro, we found no blood, we found not one of his bones. We searched for a hoofprint — nothing. We searched for a shard of his sword —

nothing. If the earth had swallowed him, the earth would show it; if the sky had taken him, the sky shows nothing. Thirteen years this knot has sat in my heart: now its end has shown itself. Kara, rise. Take me to that cave.

The two of them set out that very night. They waited for no feast, no auspicious hour; they packed their provisions into saddlebags and rode by starlight. How many days they rode, how many passes they crossed — until at last they reached the ridge above the lake of Ala-Sök. The lake gleamed below like a shield, and the mouth of the black cave sat among the rocks like a wound. Külçoro studied the ground: before the cave there were fresh hoofprints — so the khan was riding out and returning. The two warriors slipped into hollows of the rock and lay in ambush. One day they waited, two days they waited; in the mid-afternoon of the third day the earth trembled, the sound of Taybuurul's hooves came, and the rider, with the sun at his back and all his majesty about him, glided toward the cave.

Külçoro and Kara the giant sprang from either side like wolves. Taybuurul reared, the white gyrfalcon shrieked and took wing, the white hound howled; but Semetey — Semetey reached neither for his sword nor for Akkelte. When two pairs of arms lifted him from the saddle and set him on the ground, he did not so much as resist. Külçoro held his khan in his arms and looked into his face: call him living, he was like the dead; call him dead, he was like the living. His eyes were open — but his inward self was shut. His chest rose and fell — but he had no tongue. Thirteen years of longing turned in one instant to fury in Külçoro; he seized his khan by the shoulders and shook him, crying out:

— Semetey! Semetey, son of Manas! What state is this, what silence is this? Am I not Külçoro, your milk-brother? Did we not suck one breast, did we not grow in one cradle? Did I not make my body your shield before Konurbay; when Kançoro took me captive and carved out my shoulder-blade, was it not your name I raved? Speak! In Talas your mother Kanıkey's two eyes are two fountains, your wife Ayçürök has lain thirteen years in a widow's bed, your son Seytek has grown to manhood without knowing your face — speak! If you are deaf, say: I am deaf; if you are mute, say: I am mute; or is it your heart that has died while your body walks? By the spirit of Manas I swear: either you come to speech, or I wrap you as you are in white felt, wash you with my own hands, and bury you with my own hands! If dead, let us know your death; if living, let us know your life! You shall not wander in the midst of the people neither as slave nor rule over them as khan — speak, my lion, speak, or let my eyes never see you again!

And Külçoro, bent double beneath the weight of his own words, fell upon his khan's breast and wept in great heaving sobs.

✦ ✦ ✦

Was it the lament that cracked the spell, was it the fury, or was it the voice of the milk-right — who can say. In Semetey's frozen eyes there stirred first a flicker, as when a stone drops into an ice-bound lake. Then his lashes trembled, and the voice that had sat knotted in his throat for thirteen years creaked open like a rusted gate:

— Kül… çoro. Your voice… it is your voice.

Kara the giant sank down where he stood; Külçoro lifted his head, his mouth fell open, and then he gave a great shout and clasped his khan in his arms. The more Semetey spoke, the more he loosened; the more he loosened, the more he spoke; the words came first one by one, then like a flood.

— At Cılgındı, he said, when the fog came down, forty foes fell upon me at once. Kançoro had emptied my flank — I understood this only afterward. There was no deliverance; I said, let my horse be an offering to the spirit of my forefather Manas, and I drew the knife. The moment the blood touched the ground the sky split open, and such a storm broke that mountain and stone were hurled together. Out of the storm came eighty maidens, all eighty with kohl-dark eyes and tongues of sorcery. At their head was Kökmonçok — Ayçürök's sister of the peri blood. «You are mine,» she said; «I could not bring myself to harm Ayçürök, so I shall have you instead.» They bound my eyes — I could see, yet could not know what I saw. They bound my ears — I could hear, yet could not understand. They bound my tongue — I had breath, but no word. They carried me to Celpiniş, they led me through the desert of Mediyne, they shut me into the cave of Kayıpçı. Thirteen years in the arms of Kökmonçok, unable to go among men — and had I gone, unable to know them; and so I fled, and fled, from my own blood.

— Then how have you come to speech now? asked Külçoro.

— The right of milk, said Semetey. The spell bound everything; that alone it could not bind. Your voice smells of milk, my brother. But know this: this loosening is no more than the tip of a leaf; the spell holds fast at the root. Kökmonçok laughed as she left, and said: «Two things undo this knot. One is the remedies Ebep and Sebep that Bakay brought from

the land of Kakançın. The other is the breast of the mother who bore you. If white milk comes from Kanıkey's breast, the binding is undone and Semetey becomes Semetey again. If black blood comes — count me dead, and cut your hope.» My mother is old, Külçoro. Does fruit grow on a withered branch? I am afraid: I shall suckle, and blood will come, and that blood will run into my mother's heart.

Külçoro turned to Kara the giant; there was no need for words. Kara the giant leapt onto his horse and covered the road to Talas — the road that had taken him three days coming — in two. The news set the ordo on its feet: when Kanıkey heard, she set down the churn in her hands, closed her eyes for one moment, and spoke a single word: «Take me to him.» Bakay stroked his white beard and felt for the two small boxes he had never once removed from his breast — Ebep and Sebep, which had waited years upon years for this day. Ayçürök took Seytek at her side; and the caravan took to the mountain road.

It was mid-afternoon when they reached the ridge of Ala-Sök. Semetey sat before the cave upon a rock; seeing them he rose to his feet — rose, but his eyes were still half-veiled, his ears half-sealed, and he hung in a state between knowing and not knowing. The laments poured into one another: Kanıkey took her son's face in her palms and shook with the words «my lamb, my lamb»; Ayçürök wrapped thirteen years of longing in her dignity and wept without a sound; Bakay lifted his hands to the sky, saying «the ember of Manas does not go out.» To one side stood Seytek — tongue-tied, his eyes wide as divining-stones. He was seeing his father for the first time in his life; and his father was as one stepped out of the old tales: shoulders broad as a mountain pass, and his gaze, even veiled as it was, the gaze of a lion. The boy's heart would not fit within his chest; within himself he said, «so I am the son of this man» — and for the first time, orphanhood fell from his shoulders like a cast-off kaftan.

Kanıkey knelt down before her son. Her years had passed seventy, her back was bowed, her hands had become withered branches; but when she lifted her head to the sky her voice rang out as it had in her youth:

— My Creator! It was You who took me from the palace of Temirkan and made me wife to Manas. It was You who exiled me in the Altay, who made me laugh in Talas, who made me weep in Buhara. With this breast I suckled Semetey, I suckled Külçoro; with one milk I made the two of them brothers. Now from my dried-up spring I ask water once more. Give milk; do not give black blood. Once I bore my son into the world — now You bear him a second time!

And she opened her collar and held out her breast to her son. Semetey knelt and laid his head in his mother's lap — a lion of forty years, like a babe in swaddling bands. He suckled. One breath — and on the mountaintop the wind stood still. Two breaths — and across Kanıkey's face there passed first an anguish, then a light. At the third breath Kanıkey gave a cry of which none at first could say whether it was joy or pain: milk had sprung to her breast like a fountain — white, warm, abounding. Semetey drank his fill; and as he drank, the veil peeled from his eyes, the seal upon his ears was broken, and the fog within him scattered as the fog of Cılgındı had scattered. When he lifted his head, his eyes were eyes, and his gaze was a gaze.

— Mother, he said. Your face is furrowed, mother. Who cared for you while I was gone?

Kanıkey could not answer; she poured out the tears of thirteen years in a single flood. On the mountaintop, among the rocks, the whole people of the great ordo — with its Bakay, its Külçoro, its Ayçürök, its tender young khan — wept together as one; but these tears were not the tears of mourning, they were the tears of life, tears from which grass would spring wherever they fell upon the earth. Bakay stepped forward and brought out the remedies Ebep and Sebep; one he crushed and gave him to drink with water, the other he crushed and rubbed upon his brow, his temples, his wrists. The color flooded back into Semetey's face, his veins filled, and the last crumb of the enchantment withdrew from his body and was gone. Then Semetey rose to his feet, looked about him, and his eye fell upon the boy standing back, abashed.

— Who is this? he asked.

Ayçürök stepped forward:

— Your son, she said. Seytek. He was born in the grip of Kıyaz, he came back from death, at thirteen he took your vengeance, and he made Talas ready for you.

Semetey looked at his son, and the son at his father. Then the lion opened his arms, and Seytek buried himself in those arms like a stone sinking into deep water.

Talas had never seen such a feast, nor would it again. «Kanıkey has borne Semetey a second time,» said the people; «can a man be twice born of one mother? He can!» Mares were slaughtered, camels felled, cauldrons set boiling; the whole broad valley turned to the smell of meat, the steam of kumis, the voice of the dombra. By day they played at ordo, and young men hurled their fists at the knucklebones; the gökbörü broke loose, and riders

snatched up the goat and drowned the steppe in dust. By night the manasçıs beat their knees and sang the epic of the fathers' land; old men wept, young men clenched their fists. Whether it lasted seven days or nine — no one counted.

In the midst of the feast Semetey spoke little and looked long: at the faces of the people, at his son's shoulders, at his mother's hands. Once he leaned toward Külçoro and asked quietly:

— Where is Kançoro?

— At the bottom of the earth, said Külçoro. Your son sent him there. He left you no debt.

Semetey nodded; in his eyes there was neither joy nor grief — only the weight of a ledger closing.

At the height of the festivities Bakay rose to his feet, and the people fell silent.

— From Manas to Semetey, he said, from Semetey to Seytek — this is the lineage, this is the road. Semetey has come out of the enchantment, but he is weary with thirteen years; and the people need fresh blood. My word is this: let Seytek wear the crown, let Seytek sit upon the throne; and let Semetey and we old men stand behind him like a mountain.

The people thundered with one mouth: «It is fitting!» Bakay, with Kanıkey's blessing, set the golden crown upon Seytek's head; they brought out the golden throne, wrapped him in white felt, lifted him nine times toward the sky, and made him khan over Argın and Kırgız. Ayçürök had the treasury opened once again; this time the gold was scattered to the children, and laughter filled the steppe. The people flowered in plenty: the flocks lambed, the crops stood tall, caravans turned their roads from Taşken and from Buhara. It was as though fate were repaying the debt of thirteen years in a single season.

Kara the giant did not wait for the feast's end; he was of the breed that cannot sit at ease. «Let the border not stand unwatched,» he said, took up his provisions, and went to the river El-Körbös, to the farthest sentry-post of the people. As he left, he kissed Seytek on the brow:

— You have become khan, my child, he said. A khanship is a man who keeps watch over the people's sleep. I shall watch its farthest edge; you watch its heart.

No one knew that this was his last kiss.

✦ ✦ ✦

The river El-Körbös is, as its name declares, a water no people ever see; beyond it lie deserts from which no one returns. There Kara the giant made his home in a hollow of the rocks and passed his days on watch — until one morning, on the river's far side, dust appeared. Not dust — it was as though a mountain were walking. As it drew nearer it took shape: a giant was coming whose height was the height of a poplar, whose body was a fortress tower; his eyes two pits of blood, his breath the reek of burnt grass. On his back he bore a cast-iron mace the size of a tent, at his waist a belt of dragon's hide. This was Sarıbay, son of Celmoguz — he whose father Manas had slain at Celpiniş, whose heart from that day had shriveled with vengeance, an infidel sworn to tear out the seed of Manas by the root.

For one moment Kara the giant weighed and measured; he might turn back and send word, or he might stand and fight. But in the blood of Kutubiy's son, turning back was not written. He leapt onto his horse, snatched up his lance, and:

— Manas! — he loosed such a battle-cry that the water of the river shuddered.

The lance came down upon Sarıbay's chest like a thunderbolt — and shattered into splinters as if it had struck dead wood. The giant laughed; his laughter was distant thunder. Kara the giant drew his moon-axe — the axe tempered in dragon's venom, that had cloven forty shields; he struck, and struck, and struck: the axe's edge dulled like wax, and not a scratch opened on the giant's hide. Seven days Kara the giant fought; seven days alone, hungry, without water, without sleep. On the first day he fought with hope, on the third with stubbornness, on the fifth with nothing but his oath. When night fell he drank a handful from the river, leaned one breath against his horse's neck, and rose again. Now he wheeled on horseback, now he wrestled on foot; he wrapped himself around the giant's knee and could not topple him; he flung sand into his eyes and could not blind him. On the evening of the seventh day, as the sun set drowned in blood, Sarıbay raised his tent-sized mace to the sky and brought it down. The eagle, his wing broken, was stretched upon the earth. Sarıbay bent and looked at the dying warrior:

— Dog of Manas, he said, be food for dogs.

And he tore Kara the giant apart and threw him before his own blood-fed hounds. The wolves of the steppe that howled that night raised a lament for a warrior, and no one heard it.

One there was who heard: the courier Bozbala, a boy keeping watch from afar, who buried what he had seen in his heart, clung to his horse, and did not once look back until Talas. When he reached the ordo his horse died beneath him and he himself collapsed upon the threshold; and the three words that left his lips scattered the ashes of the feast in an instant:

— Kara the giant... Sarıbay... devoured...

Talas rose to its feet. The drums were beaten in fury, saddles were thrown upon the horses, swords passed across the whetstone. At the foot of the standard stood Semetey — the rust of thirteen years only newly shaken off, but his bearing once more that of the old lion of Cılgındı; at his right Külçoro, the ache of the carved-out shoulder-blade in his back, in his hand the charmed lance of the master Bölökbay. And at the head of the army, his golden crown exchanged for a helmet, the young khan Seytek. Kanıkey held her grandson's stirrup and bent to his ear:

— Do not step out of the shadow of your father and Külçoro, she said. A true man knows also when to stand and wait.

The army of Argın and Kırgız came down into the desert of El-Cürbös. On the road, from the other direction, came the wounded in flight — the champions of the borderlands, some armless, some with faces masked in blood; they were those who had escaped alive from before Sarıbay.

— Turn back! they wailed. That is no giant — it is the black eye of the Deccal himself! Lance does not pierce him, bullet does not bite him, fire does not burn him! Let whoever meets Sarıbay cut his hope of life!

A cold wind wandered through the army; the ranks shrank, and even the horses bowed their heads. It was then that Külçoro spurred his horse into the open and turned to face the host:

— Weapons do not bite him, you say — then a man shall! he cried. My father Almambet crossed the mountain of fire at Beecin — shall I turn back from a hide? Let no one stir; the blood of Kara the giant is upon my neck.

And he rode down alone to face the giant. Seeing him, Sarıbay swung his mace to his shoulder and came on like a walking mountain. Külçoro leveled his charmed lance, and the striking began: one blow, five blows, ten blows... The lance danced like lightning across the giant's chest, his flank, his neck; at the sixtieth blow the charmed iron of Bölökbay bent like

a hoop, and then it broke. Külçoro drew the moon-axe — the axe with cheeks of gold; he swung it with such force that Sarıbay's steel shield burst apart like a walnut shell. The people roared with sudden hope — but when the axe's edge met the giant's naked skin, it slid away as though struck against stone. Sarıbay laughed and set his mace whirling; and Külçoro's horse saved its life only by leaping from side to side.

At that very moment a horse broke from the ranks. It was Seytek — his young blood had boiled over, and he had lost all mastery of the reins. Sword drawn, he was riding straight upon the giant. Sarıbay saw the boy; a joy flared in the bloody pits of his eyes, and the mace rose toward the sky. As the mace descended, a shadow flung itself between: Külçoro, driving his horse with the whip's last strength, had snatched Seytek from his saddle and swerved aside. The mace hammered the spot where the boy had stood one breath before; the earth shuddered, and dust burst from the crater. Külçoro, with Seytek thrown across the back of his own horse, was trembling with rage:

— You are the khan! he shouted. If the khan dies, the people are orphaned — do you not know this? This field is not yet your hour! When your father was lost for thirteen years, who do you think held this people together — children? Return to your rank and stand there; learn first to live, not to die!

Seytek turned back with his head bowed; but from the corner of his eye he glanced at his father, and in Semetey's look, beneath the anger, he saw a spark of pride.

At the end of the seven days' fighting, Sarıbay, after the custom of the giant race, lay down into the sleep of champions: a dead man's sleep that would last seven days, that thunder itself could not break. The giant's army — the black horde he had gathered from beyond the desert — had pitched their tents and sprawled at ease while their khan slept. Külçoro scented his moment; at midnight, with picked warriors, he fell upon that horde and put them to the sword until dawn broke; he ran down those who fled, he felled those who stood. When Sarıbay woke on the seventh day, he was alone in the desert: not a tent remained, not a slave. The giant looked to the sky and howled so that the dunes shifted from their places:

— Manas strangled my father Celmoguz at Celpiniş! The dogs of Talas have slaughtered my army! I swear by the darkness: I shall not leave this desert until I have dug out the root of the Kırgız, until I have left not even the babe alive in its cradle!

And it was then that the war truly began. Semetey shouldered Akkelte — the mountain-toppling gun that had come down from Manas; he fired, and the bullet

crumpled against the giant's chest and fell. Külçoro drew the sword Oykuma — the sword to whose tempering forty sacrifices had been given; he struck, and the sword rang upon the giant's neck and glanced away. The lance was tried — it broke. The axe was tried — it dulled. Fire was set to him — and the giant stood laughing in it like a stone warming in the embers. Semetey, Külçoro, and Seytek — who had learned now to hold his rank yet did not hold back from the fight — the three of them together closed around the giant; they struck by night and struck by day, struck by day and struck by night. The horses were changed, the swords were changed; the men were not changed. But flesh tires and bone tires; and one night, in the cold of the desert, all three sank down strengthless by the fire. Semetey took his head between his two hands:

— My Creator, he said, and his voice was cracked. To my father You gave Akkula, You gave Akkelte, You gave the forty companions — and still You gave him death. You have given us this giant; why have You not given the strength to fell him? Why did You create us wanting? If You created us wanting, then show us at least the road that will make our want whole!

Whether the word touched heaven or fell to earth — no one there could know. But on the far side of the fire sat Ayçürök — Ayçürök who had come with the army, who bound the wounded and carried the food — and she slowly raised her head. In her eyes burned the light of days long past, the days when she had put on her swan-cloak while she waited for Semetey.

✦ ✦ ✦

That night Ayçürök took counsel with no one. She entered her tent and drew out the white swan-cloak that had lain folded thirteen years at the bottom of her maiden chest; she spread it upon the felt and looked at it long. Then softly she put it on. Skin turned to feather, arm turned to wing; from the smoke-hole of the tent a white swan glided out, circled once in the moonlight above the army — above her sleeping son, above her weary husband — and beat her wings toward the setting sun.

Seven days Ayçürök flew. Seven days she passed above seven climes: she saw snowbound passes, and her wings took on ice; she saw scorching deserts, and her feathers were singed. She sought a man — a man to fell a giant. She came to the land of Kökçö:

warriors many, none the match of Sarıbay. She came to the country of Akun Khan — her own father: champions many, none with the destiny written on his brow. She passed over Buhara, glided along the Sır-Derya, ranged as far as the snowy ridges of the Altay; at every halting-place her heart grew a measure heavier. «In all this world, is there not one man?» she said to herself. «Or is fate closing the ledger of Manas's line here?» Her wings failing little by little, her hope worn thin as thread, on the evening of the seventh day she came to the rim of the world; and there, where sky and earth flow together, she saw a country whose soil was red as live coals, whose sky was hot as the mouth of a clay oven. This was Kayıpçal, the land of the vanished saints; and in the middle of that red earth, before a yurt made of flame, stood a dark figure. Whether it was a woman or a mountain could not be told from afar; but in its bearing there was such power that Ayçürök's bird-heart, even at that height, gave one great thud.

Below, the figure before the yurt of fire lifted its head to the sky; it saw the white swan and smiled — deeply, like the first breath of a lioness.

Ayçürök gathered her wings and began to descend. The fate of Talas hung upon the first word that would touch that red earth; and that word had not yet been spoken.

CHAPTER 38

The Coming of Kuyali and the Price of an Oath

— ❖ —

When Külçoro came before Sarıbay the sun had not yet reached mid-morning; but the giant's shadow had long since passed noon, spread across the slopes of Talas like a black felt. The son of Celmoguz sat hunched upon a hilltop; his knees were two boulders, his shoulders two mountain ridges. When he drew breath the grasses of the steppe lay flat; when he breathed out, clouds of dust rose. Külçoro checked his horse, buried the fire in his heart beneath his tongue, and began to speak in a voice that dripped honey.

— O Sarıbay, he said, O valiant son of Celmoguz! A father's blood is heavy blood — I know it. Blood does not lie unanswered on the ground; if the blood-price is not paid, the hearth does not rest — this too I know. But a blood-price is a matter of state; it does not yield to haste, it yields to reckoning. Grant us thirty days' respite. At the end of thirty days let us offer you a beauty with the face of the moon, tulpar steeds whose hooves have

brushed the stars, and camel-loads of yellow gold. Take the price of blood not in blood but in wealth; and let your name remain both feared and open-handed.

Sarıbay's brows, hewn as from rock, stirred. Külçoro's tongue was sweet, and they say a sweet tongue draws the serpent from its hole; but this tongue lulled, for one moment, not a serpent but a giant. Sarıbay struck his broad palm upon his knee; at the blow the earth shook, and the startled herds stampeded as far as Keñ-Kol.

— Thirty days, said the giant; thirty days are yours, son of slaves. Bring the girl, bring the tulpar, bring the gold. But open your ears and hear me: if the days run full and you come before me empty-handed, I will not leave stone upon stone in Talas. I will dig out your root; I will scatter the ash of your hearth to the wind and wipe your name from every mouth. Of the seed of Manas I will leave not one breath upon the face of the earth.

As he spoke these words his voice was like the blizzards that crack the ice of the Ala-Too. Külçoro turned his horse back, a smile on his face, lead in his heart. He had learned this in the years when he was a slave at Kıyaz's gate: before a tyrant the face is one thing and the heart another; the face smiles while the heart stores strength into the wrist. As his horse walked slowly down toward the ordo, he poured reckoning upon reckoning within himself. Thirty days. In thirty days can an army be raised, can a rampart be built, can a giant be beaten? He had no intention of giving the giant the girl, the tulpar, the gold; and had he the intention, his hand would not have obeyed — for he who gives the wolf one lamb gives the flock the following year. Thirty days were a breathing-space; and he who squanders his breath, drowns. When Külçoro reached the ordo, he said as much to Semetey:

— I have won thirty days, he said, but it was not I who won them; the giant's pride granted them. The giant believes he holds us in his palm; he laughs at the fluttering of the sparrow in his fist. Let him laugh. While the sparrow flutters, it calls the falcon.

But which falcon they would call — that day, neither of the two men knew.

When the news of the calamity reached Ayçürök, the daughter of Akun Khan was standing before the gold-pillared pavilion, gazing out at Talas yellowing under the autumn sun. Thirty days. At the end of thirty days: either the blood-price, or the slaughter. And what was this price the giant named — a girl, horses, gold: given today, demanded anew tomorrow; once meat has touched the wolf's mouth, he haunts the flock forever. Tears broke from Ayçürök's eyes; but these were not the tears of helplessness — they were the tears of a road being sought. Weeping, she thought; thinking, she remembered.

In her childhood, at the wedding of Koñurçaç, among forty girls there had been one girl: her height a man's height, her wrist a man's wrist, her eyes the eyes of a falcon that has sighted its prey. While the other girls played at rings she had taken up wrestling, and with one turn of the shoulder had laid the biggest of the young men flat upon the felt; the girls had laughed, and the old men had said, "this one was born a man and remained a girl." Kuyalı, daughter of Kayıpçal. On the night of that wedding, while the moonlight painted the felts of the grey yurts silver, the two of them had gone down to the riverbank; they had drunk kumis from one bowl, had chewed white wheat and licked the knife's edge, and sworn an oath: "we are friends of the black day; if you fall into peril I will come to you, and if I fall into peril, you come to me." An oath is a heavy thing; the grain of white wheat rots in the earth, but an oath does not rot; the edge of a knife rusts, but the word of the tongue that licked the knife does not rust. Since that night many waters had flowed: Ayçürök had become a bride, a mother, a captive, and had been delivered; from Kuyalı only tidings had come — great hunts on far pastures, broken lances, battles with giants. Ayçürök dried her tears and drew the white swan garment from the bottom of the chest. For how many years she had not opened that chest; from among the feathers of the garment rose the scent of her childhood. She put on the garment whose feathers were like snow, whose collar was like moonlight; wings stretched across her shoulders, and her feet lifted from the ground.

Ayçürök became a white swan and rose into the air. Beneath her, Talas grew small; the wounded homeland, with its smoking dung-fires and its stricken grey yurts, dwindled to a handful. She crossed the sheer pass of Küyük-Bel with one beat of her wings; passing over the steppe of Kün-Ketpes, sunless as its name, hoarfrost clung to her wings. Three days and three nights she flew; three days and three nights she did not rest her wings, did not close her eyes, did not forget her oath. On the morning of the fourth day the pastures of Belendi came into view: the valley bottoms full of horse-herds, the hills full of tents, the air full of the drumming of hooves.

She found Kuyalı at the hunt. The daughter of Kayıpçal, at the head of her forty champions, an eagle on her fist and a bow at her knee, was running down a herd of wild asses. Her horse's sweat steamed in the morning frost, her braids whipped like lashes across the shoulder of her armor; the forty champions could not keep pace behind her. It was she who first saw the white swan circling in the sky; about to loose her eagle, she stayed her hand and narrowed her eyes — for the swan was not flying as a swan flies; it flew wearily, it flew sorrowfully, it flew like a human being.

— Loose no bird at her! thundered Kuyalı. That which comes is not game, but tidings.

The white swan glided down, shook herself, and was Ayçürök. Kuyalı leapt from her horse, and the two old friends embraced in the middle of the steppe; their embrace was long, and their words at first were few.

— How stands Talas? asked Kuyalı. Is Külçoro living? Has Seytek grown — does he sit his horse well?

Then she led her friend to her tent; she set kumis before her, set the cauldron boiling, dealt out the meat with her own hand; the richest portion, the guest's portion, she pushed before her friend. Ayçürök did not eat, did not drink; she poured out all that had befallen, one thing after another: Sarıbay son of Celmoguz, the blood-price of the father, the thirty days won by Külçoro's tongue, and the doom that would break when the days ran out. As she told it her voice sank lower, and as it sank her words grew heavier:

— In Talas there is no longer wedding or feast-day, she said. Mothers speak their sons' names in whispers, as though the giant would hear them if they spoke aloud. I have seen my son orphaned in his ninth year, Kuyalı; my heart cannot bear to see it again. If you do not come, no one will come.

Kuyalı listened; as she listened her brows drew together, and as they drew together the inside of the tent grew dark.

— I know Sarıbay, she said at last. He crossed my path on the banks of the river Lop. Seven days we fought with lances; seven days he could not take me, nor could I bring him down. On the evening of the seventh day he brought out the yada stone and bewitched the sky; such a storm broke that eye could not see eye. In the heart of the storm the coward slipped away. He is a giant, but no plain giant; he has sorcery, he has a secret. Whoever fights him fights not with the wrist alone.

She fell silent, turning the kumis bowl in her hand. Then she raised her head, and her voice softened:

— Our oath is our oath, Ayçürök. We chewed the white wheat, we licked the knife; you have fallen into peril, and I will come. But let me hide no truth from you either: a longing has long lain in my heart. I wish to see Semetey once. His name I have heard often; his face I have never seen. This time the road of the oath and the road of the longing are one.

What lay beneath these words Ayçürök could not weigh in that moment; nor had she the strength to weigh it. She pleaded:

— Rise, then — rise and come! Half the thirty days have melted on the road; Talas awaits you, Seytek awaits you, the oath awaits you.

Kuyalı rose to her feet; her rising was like the uprising of a lioness. She buckled on her armor, slung her shield upon her back, seized her lance. From among the tents came forth old Muratay; his white beard reached his belly, and his mind was sound — a legacy of Kuyalı's father Kayıpçal.

— Wherever my daughter rides, I am her guide, he said. And the forty champions have sworn: whoever dies on this road dies a martyr, and whoever lives, a ghazi.

The forty champions mounted their horses, kissed their swords, and swore the oath. They were forty-one riders: at their head Kuyalı, at her side Ayçürök with the white swan garment tucked beneath her arm, behind them Muratay. The main strength of the army would muster and follow after; the vanguard did not wait. They rode out from Belendi and struck into the snow passes of the Çatkal. Three days and three nights they beat the road; in the passes the manes of the horses took on ice, on the descents the hooves struck sparks. By night they lit no fires and did not leave the saddle; they ate dried meat and drank snow-water. On the way Muratay told the young men of Kayıpçal: what manner of man he had been, how he had kept his oath, how in dying he had said to his daughter, "I bequeath my oath to you." Kuyalı listened and never once broke in; she only drew the reins a little tighter, and her horse went a little faster. It was mid-afternoon when Talas came into view — and the sight that met them wrung even the hardest hearts.

Over Talas hung smoke; beneath the smoke, slaughter. Seytek, they learned, had been fighting nine days and had taken nine wounds; his young body was swathed in bandages, his eye still upon the field. Külçoro they had carried back to Üç-Koşoy; wounded in ninety places, spent upon his bed, his lips bleeding not from his wounds but from defeat. On the field the shafts of broken lances lay heaped like brushwood; the iron of weapons snapped on the giant's body like corn-stalks, and Sarıbay grew like a mountain, ringing Talas round as though to close it in one fist.

Kuyalı drew rein and looked long upon the field; in her gaze there was neither fear nor haste. Ayçürök sat frozen upon her horse: had she come too late, had she come in time — that, now, would be told not by days but by swords.

✦ ✦ ✦

How Talas had come to those black days — the wind knew it, and those who had fought.

On the morning the thirty days ran full, Sarıbay had come down from his hill and demanded his price; and Semetey had come out before the gold-pillared pavilion and sworn his oath in the presence of the people and the companions:

— My forefathers' land Talas, the white-bearded elder of the Kırgız, the black-haired youth, the white-veiled woman — I will not yield them as plunder to the swine-spawn of Celmoguz! I will die before I bow the neck; sooner than be a slave I will be food for wolves. Külçoro, Seytek — fight to the death!

The assembled people of Argın and Kırgız had thundered with one mouth, and their voices had turned back the echo of the Ala-Too:

— Let us die at Sarıbay's hand! Let us be cut down and gone, but not bend and remain!

And they had fought. But what fighting was this? The giant with brows of rock and fists like millstones wheeled about the field as though sworn to stuff the whole world into his sack; no lance bit him, no bullet passed. Külçoro broke sixty steel-hafted lances one by one upon the giant's body; each he aimed at the seat of life, and each splintered and fell as though driven into dead wood. When the haft of the sixtieth lance stayed in his hand, Külçoro paused a moment and looked at his palm; his palm was all blood, and the giant's hide bore not even a scratch. They fired their guns; the bullets flattened and fell as though striking felt. They leveled Ak-Kelte, the relic of Manas; Ak-Kelte's fire had pierced mountains and ground thick ramparts to flour — it could not pierce the giant's hide, and its smoke scattered and died upon the giant's chest. When Sarıbay laughed the field shook, and his laughter felled more of the hale than of the wounded; for where the sword does not cut, hope is cut, and where hope is cut an army starts at its own shadow.

On the evening of the ninth day Seytek came to the gold-pillared pavilion, bowed over his horse's neck. His nine wounds throbbed like nine mouths, but what truly bled was his tongue's pride. He bowed his head before his father; Seytek the warrior, who at thirteen had learned his lineage, who had taken his vengeance upon Kançoro, who had brought his spellbound father out of the black cave to speech — that evening he spoke like a child.

— Father, he said, before Sarıbay I have become nothing. My lance is broken, my sword is bent, my wrist is spent. I have become nothing, father.

Semetey laid his hand on his son's shoulder; laid it there, but found no word. What could he say — "you are still a child"? Seytek had spent his childhood in the shadow of Kıyaz, under a decree of death; childhood was in his debt, not he in childhood's. Should he say, "I am here"? His heart knew that his own lance would break on that same body. That night he did not sleep; in the starlight that fell upon the felt of the pavilion he thought of his father, and of his father's father; what would Manas have done, he asked the darkness — and the darkness gave no answer. At dawn he had Buurul saddled. He drew over his shoulders the Akolpok that Kanıkey had long ago charmed and laid away, the armor that had come through so many campaigns; he took up his lance and rode out to single combat.

— Sarıbay! he called. Army is the business of armies; man is the business of man. Come — let the two of us meet!

The giant lowered his moon-axe from his shoulder. They fought. Sarıbay's moon-axe flashed in the air like the moon itself and came down upon Semetey; came down, and was quenched in the Akolpok — the armor of Manas's legacy swallowed the axe's edge like felt; Semetey was shaken, but did not fall. In answer Semetey drove his lance with all his strength into the giant's breast; the lance flew to pieces like a reed dashed against rock, its haft stayed in his hand, and his arms went numb to the shoulders. Buurul staggered back; Semetey barely held him with the rein.

Then Sarıbay planted his axe upon the ground and roared out the root of his vengeance; his voice echoed on both banks of the Talas:

— Do you know me, son of the son of Manas? My father was Celmoguz! Your grandfather Manas crushed my father at Celpiniş; he plundered my homeland, drove off my herds, put out my hearth. Since that day I have grown; I have grown on blood, I have grown on hatred. A father's blood does not lie unanswered — I will take my price from the root of Talas!

When Semetey returned to the pavilion, all was dark within him. That night, in the most insidious hour of solitude, a rotten thought dripped into his heart: what if he paid the tribute? Give the goods, give the gold; set Ayçürök and the daughters of the people before the giant; step aside himself and set white-bearded Bakay at the head; let the blood stop, let the people live... Once — once only — he let this thought fall upon his tongue, and

Külçoro gave him no chance to let it fall again. Rising from his bed despite his ninety wounds, the son of Almambet poured fire from his mouth:

— Great is your valor, small is your sense, Semetey! Whose son are you, that your tongue can hold the word tribute? To give Ayçürök — that is to give our mother! Better we all die together than crown Sarıbay in Talas. May the spirit of Manas not hear this word; if he hears it, he will turn over in his tomb!

And tearing away his bandages he armed himself anew and threw himself anew into the field. The three heroes — Semetey, Külçoro, Seytek — and the army behind them fought the giant breast to breast. They fought, but it was ever their own ranks that were reaped. Sarıbay mowed the army as a reaper mows grain, and roared as he mowed:

— Where is Semetey? Where is Külçoro? Where is Seytek? Do not hide! Bring the gold, bring the herds, bring the girls — or no chimney shall smoke in Talas!

When evening came and the field emptied, Semetey and Külçoro sat back to back, their wounds unbound; and that night the two heroes recalled one by one the triumphs of the past and raised their great lament.

— Do you remember the day we stood beneath the walls of Beecin? said Semetey. Konurbay's lance touched my breast and did not pass through; had I died that day, my name would have remained with victory.

— Do you remember the day the two of us scattered the army of Çınkoco and Toltoy? said Külçoro. Those young days when we rode to win Ayçürök? What have I become for not dying then — a warrior's death on the field was beautiful, and I have been kept for this day.

— We came alive out of so many campaigns, said Semetey — were we saved for this day? Were we saved for the giant's laughter?

The wind caught their lament, and the wind carried it to the grey yurts of Talas; the women wept, the children cowered, and the people streamed in flocks to shelter around Semetey's pavilion — for in a collapsing world the one pillar left to cling to was still the line of Manas.

And in that darkest hour, Ayçürök, who had circled the four corners of the earth seeking a deliverer, brought hope home on a white swan's wing: at the head of forty-one riders who had crossed the Çatkal, Kuyalı, daughter of Kayıpçal, rode into Talas.

✦ ✦ ✦

Kuyalı did not come with forty champions alone. A great army that had risen from Belendi behind her poured into Talas three days later: an army with thundering drums, with standards streaming in the wind, its loads of arrows and powder borne on camels. The camel train stretched from one end of the valley to the other, and its bells, in defiance of the war's dull roar, rang out a wedding air. When it halted before Semetey's residence and the dust cloud settled, the people of Talas remembered something long forgotten: hope too had a voice, and that voice was like the voice of drums. The children came out of their hiding places and set about counting the camels; they could not count them — the camels had no end.

Kuyalı dismounted and entered the residence. Kanıkey met her at the door; the stately lady of Manas measured the bearing of the girl who came with a single glance, and saw a thing she had not seen in years: this girl was not afraid of the field. They led her in and seated her in the place of honor. And Kuyalı saw Semetey.

Her seeing him and her heart's kindling were one. Before her stood the hero whose name she had heard for years, whose face she had sought in her dreams: he was weary, he was wounded, frost had fallen on his hair — but his bearing was the bearing of Manas. Kuyalı did what she had never done on any battlefield: she looked away. Then she straightened; she was of those who know that waiting, hiding, and winding roads are no business of a warrior. All who sat in the residence turned to her: Bakay stroked his beard and waited, Kanıkey narrowed her eyes, Seytek leaned forward in wonder. Kuyalı looked at no one; she looked only at Semetey, and she spoke her word straight and true, as one hurls a lance:

— Semetey, she said, I owe you a word, and I will not gird on my sword until it is spoken. My father Kayıpçal was the six-times-sworn friend of your grandfather Manas. The two drank from one bowl and licked the knife six times. My father promised me to you while I still lay in the cradle; "let my daughter grow, and let her wed the grandson of Manas," he said, and so he died. I grew up with that writing upon me. Now my army is at your gate and my sword is in its sheath; the price of my help is plain: I ask marriage. Take me, and I will fell the giant.

A silence fell upon the residence; such a silence that even the drums outside could no longer be heard. The first to speak was Ayçürök; the daughter of Akun Khan, her dignity unbroken, took her oath-friend's hand:

— Kuyalı, she said, you are dearer to me than my own soul. Come, be the first wife; I will sit in your shadow. Let Talas be saved, and the crown be yours to wear.

But Semetey raised his head; in his face there was pain, in his voice there was stone:

— Kuyalı, he said, your word is weighty and your heart is noble; your father's oath rests upon the crown of my head. But I too swore an oath. On my wedding day, when I took Ayçürök, I bit the arrow and vowed: "I will bring no second wife over her." An oath sworn upon a bitten arrow is an oath of iron; the man who breaks it is no man. If I break my oath, who will believe me — and how shall I believe myself? But let me offer you a man who is your equal: Külçoro, son of Almambet! In valor he walks before me; in faithfulness the world holds no match for him. It is he who rose from his bed with ninety wounds and entered the field. Take him; make the hearth of Almambet smoke again, and let your name become epic with his.

Kuyalı's face went first white, then flaming crimson. The writing she had carried since the cradle was being handed to another with a single stroke. Her pride rose up within her breast like a wounded leopard:

— Shall I wed the servant while the lord stands living? she blazed. I am the daughter of Kayıpçal! My father wrote me to the blood of Manas, not to his companion! Külçoro is valiant, you say — let his valor be his own! Am I goods, to be passed from hand to hand like a blood-price?

Ayçürök stepped in between; with one hope she put Seytek forward:

— What of Seytek? she said. The blood of Manas, Semetey's own son; a young tulpar, his star just rising. Take him, Kuyalı; so neither the writing is broken nor the oath.

It availed nothing. Ayçürök invoked the vows of their childhood; she invoked Koñurçaç's wedding, the white wheat, the knife's edge — that too availed nothing.

— My oath is my oath, said Kuyalı; I came to you, and my coming is enough. But an oath writes no debt upon any heart. You asked me to come to your aid, and I came; you did not ask for my heart — that I brought of my own will. What I brought, I can carry back.

Two drops slid from Kuyalı's eyes; the warrior girl did not wipe them, nor did she let them fall; the tears froze upon her lashes.

— When I was sixteen, she said in a choked voice, I fought Celmoguz himself for six days. He had come down upon my father's pastures; he was swallowing the herds, drying up the wells. Six days and six nights we fought; he did not throw me, and I did not flee. On the evening of the sixth day he withdrew; as he went he said, "this girl's hand is heavy," and said no other word. The race of giants fears my hand. I did not come to Talas to sell my sword; I brought my heart. It seems there was no room for my heart. Then my sword too shall stay in its sheath.

And she withdrew; she had her tent pitched in the midst of her army and sat there, her sword undrawn, in her grievance. Her forty champions exchanged glances, old Muratay tore at his beard; but the stubbornness of Kayıpçal's daughter was like the rock of the Çatkal — no word could work upon it.

At that very hour, from the field came the voice of Sarıbay; the giant was roaring his all-encompassing challenge over Talas:

— Come, all of you! Let Semetey come, let Külçoro come, let Seytek come! Let your old man Bakay come too! Bring your women with you! Will you be broken one by one, or all together — choose!

✦ ✦ ✦

That night the line of Manas was left alone with its fate. Hope had come to the very door, and turned back from the door; the drums of Belendi were no longer in the reckoning, nor the swords of the forty champions. What remained were three heroes, a handful of weary people, and a handful of iron left by the forefathers. That night Ayçürök went once more to her friend's tent; she stood at the door and could not enter. From within came no sound of weeping, no breath of sleep; there came only the hiss of a sword being whetted — a sword sworn never to leave its sheath, and yet being whetted. Ayçürök wrote that sound upon her heart and turned back in silence: to be aggrieved was one thing; to renounce was another.

Semetey girded on Zülfikar. Zülfikar was the sword of the fathers' legacy; let its edge but touch a meadow and the meadow caught fire; struck against rock, it drew from the rock not sparks but flame. Semetey went out to the field and fought. Not one day, not ten days — seventy days he fought. For seventy days the edge of Zülfikar flashed like lightning

upon the giant's body; where it touched, the grasses burned and the stones melted, but Sarıbay's hide was not so much as scratched. On the evening of the seventieth day Semetey bowed over the sword's hilt; the sword was blameless, the masters who had forged it were blameless — the one who stood against him was not of the kind that swords can touch.

That evening Bakay came to Semetey's side; the white-bearded elder had seen with his own eyes that the sword did not cut, and he did not hide what he had seen:

— My child, he said, the race of Celmoguz is born armored from the mother's womb. Iron does not cut them, fire does not burn them; only the secret of fate itself can pierce them. In whosoever's hand that secret lies, in his palm lies the victory. I do not know that secret; but one thing I know: a secret opens to the one who seeks, not to the one who bows.

And Sarıbay, each day at evening, told over his lineage and fed his vengeance:

— Since Nogoy, he roared, the reckoning of six forefathers lies upon your necks! Your fathers slaughtered my fathers; Manas crushed my father Celmoguz. The blood of six forefathers makes six seas — and I will fill that sea with Talas! Give what I ask, and keep your root: give me Kanıkey, give me Ayçürök! Lead Buurul before me, strip the Akolpok from your backs! Load six thousand camels with gold! If you do not give it, by my oath, I will scatter the smoke of your hearths into the sky!

The people listened to these words from behind the felts of the grey yurts; every evening the same roar, every evening the same trembling. Mothers pressed their children to their breasts, old men turned toward the qibla murmuring prayers, young girls looked at the dowries in their chests as one looks at the belongings of the dead. But Kanıkey — Kanıkey, whose name passed on the giant's tongue as an item of the price — stood like stone; the woman who had seen the mourning of Manas, who had seen the treachery of Abıke and Köböş, who had seen the roads of Buhara, was not one to be cowed by the bellowing of a giant.

When Seytek heard this ultimatum, he could bear no more. His nine wounds had not yet scabbed over; but young blood does not heed scabs. He leapt onto his horse and seized his lance:

— How shall we bow to the word of tyranny? he cried. Kanıkey is my great mother, Ayçürök my own mother! Is the man who writes his mother into a blood-price to be counted a man upon this earth? If I die, let me die on the road of Manas!

And he charged into the field. They fought; the lances flew to pieces on both sides, the broken shafts spun in the air, Seytek's horse went down and rose again — the giant did not stir the breadth of a hand from his place. They drew the young hero back; when they drew him back, in his hand there remained only a broken shaft of his lance, and in his eye a fire not yet quenched.

Then Külçoro rose from his bed at Üç-Koşoy for the last time. His ninety wounds protested with ninety mouths; he did not listen. The old women who ran to him said, "you must lie still, your wounds will open"; "and what is a wound," said Külçoro, "I did not die when Kıyaz carved out my shoulder-blade — shall I die in a bed?" He looked first not at the field but at the sky; and the son of Almambet raised his great lament against the treacherous world:

— O faithless world! he said. You devoured my father Almambet on the road to Beecin, and were not filled. You devoured Manas, and were not filled. You hid Semetey for years in the black cave, and were not filled. You made me a slave at Kıyaz's gate, you had my shoulder-blade carved out — and were not filled. And now you have loosed the leavings of Celmoguz upon us. Devour, then! But know that in devouring Külçoro your tooth will break; I will not be swallowed raw!

Then he had the chests opened. One by one he brought out the legacy of his father Almambet: first Sırbaran — the gun whose barrel had been charmed with a spell, whose fire never strayed — and slung it on his back. Then he girded on the sword Coykuma; its sheath was blackened, its edge was light. Then he seized the charmed lance hammered on the anvil of the masters Bölökbay and Davut; its iron had drunk water, its charm had drunk prayer. Over all he put on the arrow-proof kandagay; the close-woven leather armor wrapped his body like a mother's embrace. The man who puts on iron over ninety wounds has put on the pain as well, and worn it inward.

Semetey came and stood before his brother. He found no words; where words ended, tears spoke. He opened his two hands and, with brimming eyes, stood to prayer:

— Forefather Manas! he said. If your spirit wakes, look out from your tomb! His father Almambet drank from one bowl with you, and died for you on the road to Beecin; now his son enters the field on your road. I entrust Almambet's son, my own brother, to you. Guard him — I could not. I could not guard him when he was a slave at Kıyaz's gate; I could not guard him when his shoulder-blade was carved out; now at least, You guard him.

Spirits of the forty companions, çiltens, Kıdır my father — walk all of you at his side. If my brother's blood falls to the ground, let my own soul not remain in my body.

Külçoro mounted his horse. Once he looked at Semetey, once at Seytek, and once at the yellowed slopes of Talas — as though taking leave of them all, as though pressing them all to his heart. Then he drew the reins tight, leveled the charmed lance, and from the very depths of his chest he roared out that one word left by the forefathers, that name which is at once prayer and battle-cry:

— Manas!

The cry hammered both banks of the Talas, struck the snows of the Ala-Too and returned; the wounded who heard it rose, the coward who heard it burned with shame. They used to say that when that name is cried once upon the steppe, even the stones fall into rank; so it was that evening — the scattered army gathered, warriors rose from beside dead hearths, Seytek flung away his broken lance and seized the sword that hung at his father's saddle. Külçoro swooped upon Sarıbay like an arrow. The giant raised his axe; dust whirled into the sky, and the earth began to beat like two hearts.

The hardest hour of the battle had begun — and at the edge of the camp, beside a sword never drawn from its sheath, Kuyalı had risen to her feet and stood watching the field.

CHAPTER 39

The Bride of the Last Day and the Lioness

— ❖ —

The wind came to Talas that night bearing evil tidings. First the herds took fright, the mares neighing as they called their foals to them; then, at the far edge of the steppe, above the black hills beyond Keń-Kol, a cloud of dust rose so vast that it swallowed the sun and turned day into dusk. The outriders came in one after another on horses ridden half to death, their tongues cleaving to the roofs of their mouths:

— Sarıbay is coming! Sarıbay, son of Celmoguz, the black eye of the Deceiver, is coming! He has sworn to tear the Kirghiz out by the root, and he marches on Talas with his eighty-one champions and a host beyond counting!

A great clamor broke out in the ordo. Some girded on their swords, some clutched their children to their breasts, some stepped out upon their thresholds and gazed at the snowy peaks of the Ala-Too, praying silently within. The old ones knew the name of Celmoguz: sovereign of Celpiniş, an ogre never sated with the flesh of men, that dark power whom the great-hearted Manas had once put to the sword. Now his son Sarıbay,

sworn to pursue his father's blood-debt through seven generations, was coming to demand that ancient reckoning from the grandson of Manas.

Külçoro, son of Almambet — that hardened companion who had known the years of bondage when his shoulder blade was gouged, who had eaten the ash-strewn bread of captivity and lived to see the day of vengeance and return — leapt onto his steed without asking counsel of anyone. He buckled on his armor, seized his lance, and did not so much as glance back at those who called after him. Only Seytek reached his stirrup and laid a hand upon the strap:

— Elder brother Kül, alone? Wait, let me arm myself too!

— Stay, my child, — said Külçoro, his voice like stone. — Let this enemy first taste the temper of my lance. Let me see what manner of thing this Sarıbay is. The companion of the Kirghiz is not yet dead; let him know it.

And he rode. Alone, into the heart of the steppe, a single horseman went out against a host that spread like a black cloud; those who watched from the rooftops of Talas felt pride and grief in equal measure as he went, for he who rode out was one, and those who came were thousands.

When Sarıbay saw him, he halted his host. Single combat between champions was the custom of the ancestors; the giant-framed enemy came forward on Cooruker, his horse like a mountain beneath him. Two lances crashed together, and both snapped like reeds. They took up a second pair; those broke too. A third, a fifth, a tenth... The day turned, night fell, the moon rose, the moon set, and still the two of them fought. When the lances were spent they seized their crescent-axes; when the axe-blades were notched they drew their swords; when the swords shattered on shoulder-plate they set upon each other with maces. Külçoro broke seventy lances in that duel, and seventy shafts were left in his hand; but Sarıbay's hide seemed wrought of black iron — Külçoro struck him in forty places and could not shake him once.

At last the strength drained out of the body of the one who was mortal. Külçoro's arm rose and would not fall; blood dimmed his eyes, his ears rang. Sarıbay saw it and laughed as the wolf laughs at the lamb, and swinging his mace he brought it down upon the brow of the steed. The horse, that faithful beast, sank to its knees, neighed once in agony, and fell. Külçoro was thrown to the ground; before he could rise from where he had fallen, a captive's net woven of iron was cast over him, binding his arms, bowing his neck. Sarıbay dismounted, and his black shadow fell across the wounded man:

— Son of Almambet, — he said, — your father fled from Beecin and took refuge with Manas; to whose skirt will you cling now? Speak your last words, for your head belongs to me.

Külçoro laughed through his bloodied mouth:

— You ask a last word of a Kirghiz warrior? Take it, then: the hearth of Manas has not gone out. You have thrust your hand into its embers; you will burn.

Sarıbay raised his sword. And in that instant — the instant the sword hung suspended in the air — there came from the direction of Talas a thunder of hooves that shook the earth. Seytek, son of Semetey, that young lion who at thirteen had learned his lineage and taken his first vengeance, had hurled himself into the field, trusting in God and in the spirits of the ancestors. In his hand was the crescent-axe handed down from Manas: that hallowed weapon with its golden cheeks and birchwood haft, its edge tempered sixty times in dragon's venom. The young hero was pleading inwardly: Great-hearted grandsire, let your spirit be upon me; Kıdır, my father, make strong my arm!

Seytek reached him before Sarıbay could turn; before the sword returned to its master the crescent-axe fell — not upon Sarıbay, but upon what he loved more than his own life: upon the thick neck of his horse Cooruker. With a single blow the head of that mountain of a beast was parted from its body, and black blood watered the steppe. When Sarıbay saw his horse go down he loosed a roar that the mountains echoed; and in that breath of his bewilderment Seytek cut through the net on the ground with the crescent-axe, gathered up Külçoro all covered in blood, and hauled him onto his own crupper, onto the haunches of Celceerde:

— Hold on, elder brother Kül, hold on! Would I ever leave you as carrion for these?

Celceerde became a bird, became an arrow; the lances hurled after them flew wide, and the black host swallowed dust. The gates of Talas opened for two riders, and closed behind two riders.

The joy of deliverance was brief. Sarıbay stood for a night over the headless body of his horse; his fury would not be contained, it overflowed, and it found his own men. — You let a child through! — he thundered, and with his own hand he slew ten or so of the foremost of his eighty-one champions, old Çañdayak among them; their blood was no balm to his blood. Then he had his camel Celmayan brought, the beast that ran like the wind, settled himself between its humps, and drew a ring around Talas.

From that day life in Talas stood still. No mare was tethered for milking, and the milking ceased; no lamb was slaughtered, no cauldron boiled; no seed was sown, no sickle swung. With no kumiss drawn, the leather sacks dried out; with the sacks dry, hospitality ended; with hospitality ended, the songs fell silent — and a land whose songs have fallen silent is a land upon which winter has descended, though the season be summer. Mothers hid their children beneath the felts and peered through the door-cracks at the steppe; the old men went to the burial grounds and pressed their faces to the ancestral stones. Children climbed onto the roofs to count the enemy fires, and could not count them to the end. Semetey rode out to the field, fought the day long, and came back wounded at evening; Ayçürök unlaced the bloody armor with her own hands and bound his wounds without letting a single sigh escape her lips. The next day Külçoro had his bandages stripped off and rode out; he flung aside the lance he broke and snatched up another, and he too came back wounded. Seytek rode out and fought with his young blood; three times he landed his lance, three times his sword touched home, and not once could he stir Sarıbay in his saddle. In the evenings the giant would settle himself before his own tent and bellow toward Talas: — Are you weary, crumbs of Manas? I can wait seven generations; let me see you endure seven days! — So the days passed; the wounds of the three heroes piled one upon another, and hope wore thin as thread.

It was in that darkness that Ayçürök, daughter of Akun Khan, remembered her maiden years, when she had donned her white swan plumage and roamed the world. In those days, gliding through the heavens, she had met another winged one, a lioness of peri blood: Kuyalı, daughter of Kayıpçal. They had sworn oaths to one another and become friends unto the world beyond. And Kuyalı was the one soul on earth who had already measured herself against Sarıbay, who had hunted him for seven years.

Ayçürök entered the gray yurt where Semetey lay and sank down at his knee:

— My lord, — she said, — the strength of men does not suffice against this enemy. But I know one whom Sarıbay fears. Let me send word to Kuyalı, my friend unto the hereafter; I hold the claim of friendship upon her, and she will come.

The message went, the wing went, the word went. Whether Kuyalı came or did not come is the tale of the days that followed; she came, and she stood before Talas. But the help she brought carried a price, and she named that price with her own lips:

— Ayçürök, my friend unto the hereafter, I will not deny your claim. But I am the servant of my fate. God knows, one night Kıdır my father appeared to me in a dream:

white-bearded, in a green cloak, a staff in his hand. He said: "My daughter, your arm shall overcome Sarıbay, but on one condition: that you be wedded to Semetey, son of Manas. If you enter that field unwed, your blood will lie unavenged upon the ground." I grew up with this dream; I have lived by this dream. If Semetey takes me in marriage, I will fight Sarıbay; if he will not, then farewell — I return whence I came.

The word fell upon Talas and split Talas down the middle. On one side lay the salvation of the homeland, on the other the oath of a lord; on one side the smoke of a thousand hearths, on the other the honor of a single word. Night after night this was debated in the gray yurts; some said, "even an oath exists for the homeland's sake — if the homeland perishes, what use is the oath?" — and some said, "a lord who breaks his oath forfeits his lordship, though he save the land." Both sayings were true, and where two truths collide, only a sage can lead the people out.

✦ ✦ ✦

The elders gathered; the white beards poured out before the ordo. Greatest among them was Bakay, father of counsel to Manas, pillar of three generations — near now to his deathbed, the strength gone from his knees, but his word still like a mountain. The people wept and pleaded:

— Semetey, our lion, the salvation of the homeland hangs upon a wedding! Our mares go unmilked, our children hunger, we cannot find open ground to bury our dead. Seal this marriage — save us!

Semetey rose to his feet. His face had gone pale, but his eye was like steel:

— O my people, O my elders! Ask my life of me, and I will give it; ask my blood, and I will shed it. But I swore an oath to Ayçürök. On the day I delivered her from the hands of Çınkoco and Toltoy, on the day my white swan spread her wings over me, I swore: I will take no second wife over you, I said; if I die, let me die with my oath, I said. If the lord of the Kirghiz tramples his oath, then even if Sarıbay does not destroy that land, the lie will. An oath is a debt upon the neck; I will not break mine.

Then he turned to Kuyalı, and his voice softened:

— Lioness, your claim is great; let your heart be generous. Let me give you Külçoro, whom I love as my own son; he is Almambet's son, noble of line, pure of heart.

Kuyalı lifted her head; in her eyes burned the far light of the peri race:

— Against the son of Almambet I have no word; he is a true man. But my fate is written for a lord. While the lord stands, I will not go to the vassal.

— Then take Seytek: my own son, grandson of Manas, the future itself.

— I wish my child Seytek long life; but Kıdır did not show him to me. While the lord stands, I will not take the child either. My word is my word; my condition is my condition.

Silence fell. In that silence Ayçürök rose to her feet — dignified, her neck bowed but her head held high — and did the hardest thing a woman can do: with her own hand she renounced her own right. She came before her husband and struck her knee to the ground:

— My lord, — she said, — that oath you swore to me, and I release you from it. Shall I flinch because she would be my rival-wife? Kuyalı is my friend unto the hereafter; we have broken bread together, we have beaten wings together in the sky. When the homeland burns, shall I think of the crown upon my own head? Semetey, I beg you: consent to this marriage. Else tomorrow, when Talas lies in ashes, we two shall lie in ashes beneath that oath.

A single tear fell from Semetey's eye into his beard; yet still he shook his head:

— An oath is sworn in the presence of God, my lady. Your pardon does not suffice; it cannot be unmade.

And then a voice came from the deathbed. They had carried Bakay to the assembly wrapped in felts; the great old man raised himself, they held him on either side, and he stood. He cast one look over the assembly, and every soul trembled inwardly.

— Hear me, — said Bakay, and his voice was like the rustle of dry leaves, yet every word of it was written in stone. — I am the last old man of the line of Böyön; I raised Manas upon my knee, I carried Semetey on my back, I gave Seytek his birth-name. Now let me open to you a secret, that I may not carry it with me when I depart. The house of Kayıpçal and our house are, from of old, blood kin: two embers from one hearth, two rivers from one spring. Kuyalı is no stranger's daughter to us but our own; her right is our right, her fate is our fate. Semetey, my child! Your oath is for this world — do not break it; let Ayçürök remain the lady of this world, let her sit in the place of honor, let her have no rival-wife. But the hereafter is another ledger. Though it be nothing in this world, seal the compact of the world to come! Let Kuyalı be your bride of the Last Day; let your marriage

hold sway not in this world but in the next. Thus neither is the oath broken, nor does fate go to waste. This is my final judgment; accept it, that I may not depart with my eyes open.

The assembly drew a breath as if all Talas breathed at once. Semetey was silent a long, long while; then he looked into Ayçürök's face, and Ayçürök bowed her head. He looked into Kuyalı's face; in the lioness's eyes shone the dream of Kıdır.

— The judgment of Bakay my father is the judgment of God, — said Semetey. — Let it be a bond of the Last Day.

The oath was sealed. It was sealed with the blood of a white sheep, with the kissing of a sword, with God and the spirits of the ancestors called to witness. Ayçürök and Kuyalı embraced; the old oath once sworn wing to wing in the sky was renewed hand in hand upon the earth. — In this world let me be your shadow, — said Kuyalı, — in that world be my neighbor. — Ninety mares were slaughtered, the cauldrons were set up, and in the white palace of Kanıkey a feast was held for seven days. A feast under siege; bounty in the midst of famine; the stubbornness of life in the shadow of death. Kanıkey, the stately widowed lady of Manas, covered her silver hair and waited upon the guests with her own hands; Ayçürök and Kuyalı sat side by side — one the lady of this world, one the beloved of the next, two friends unto the hereafter. The bards played the komuz, the young passed round the kumiss, the elders gave their blessing. A manasçı sat down in the midst of the gathering and told of great-hearted Manas's campaign against Beecin; and as he told it the backs of the listeners straightened, as if every word were a shield, every breath a lance. That night Seytek did not stir from the manasçı's knee; each time his grandfather's name was spoken, his heart reared up like a stallion. On every night of the seven, beyond the walls, the fires of Sarıbay could be seen; but for those seven nights Talas looked not toward fear, but toward hope.

On the morning after the seventh night, hope was tried again in blood. Before dawn broke, Sarıbay hurled his whole strength forward; a rain of arrows found the rooftops, balls of fire fell, and the edge of Talas and the summer dwellings of Keñ-Kol caught flame. From among the flames the enemy's criers shouted:

— Give up Ayçürök, give up old Bakay! Refuse, and we shall leave no stone upon stone, no head upon shoulders!

Could they be given? It was a woman who gave Talas's answer. Karlıgaç, sister of Manas, that formidable lady, plaited her hair tight and tucked it beneath her helmet, armed her own six thousand soldiers, and mounted the walls: — Whoever demands my brother's

daughter-in-law from my brother's land must first pass my brother's sister! — Six months she fought; she broke six hundred lances of steel, and the heap of broken lances rose into a hill; half her six thousand were wounded, she herself was thrown from her horse three times and three times remounted — and still she could not bring Sarıbay down. For this enemy would not fit within the measure of human strength; the blood of Celmoguz, the darkness of the ogre race, was armor in his very hide. Yet Karlıgaç's six months were not spent in vain: while she fought, the enemy could not enter Talas; the houses put to the torch were roofed anew; and the true hope, the hope of the marriage of the Last Day, grew up behind the rampart of those six months.

On one of those long nights of siege, while the fires burned facing one another, the tale of two vows came to light. First from the mouth of the enemy: Sarıbay, releasing a shepherd he had taken captive, had made the man speak his grievance, and word had drawn forth word, until at last he had torn open his own wound. — I was seven years old, — he had said, staring into the flames. — When Manas put my father Celmoguz to the sword, I was seven years old. I grew up in the throne-hall of Celpiniş, at the foot of the empty throne; my mother sang me laments in place of lullabies. In every morsel I ate was my father's blood; in every sleep, his voice. Though it last seven generations, this cause is my cause: until not one breath of the line of Manas remains, my sword shall not enter its sheath. They call me cruel; I am only an orphan — orphanhood girded with a sword.

In those same nights, in the white palace of Kanıkey, Kuyalı too poured out her past; for it was the custom that before a wedding the people should know the bride's lineage. — They found me, — she said, — in a meadow where the peri maidens play: a girl-child on the dew-wet grass, unswaddled, and not crying. Kayıpçal my father took me to his breast, owned me as his own daughter, taught me to ride, to draw the bow, to gird the sword. In his land I grew; by his line I was ennobled. Then the black day came: my father passed away. We held his funeral feast; by the custom of the ancestors we ran the swift horses; and it was that very feast Sarıbay came to plunder — he overturned the cauldrons and made to put the guests to the sword. I was alone that day; alone I went out against him, broke his lance, and drove him from my own feast. Seven years I hunted him; seven years he fled from me, and I never fled from him. But my arm alone was not enough to bring him down; nor would it be, until the day Kıdır my father foretold should come. That day is this day.

Ninety mullahs were brought; before the ninety mullahs the marriage was sealed, to be inscribed in the ledger of the hereafter. The moment it was sealed, Kuyalı rose to her feet — now the bride of Talas, and its sword:

— I have one request, — she said. — I know Sarıbay's hide; common steel will not bite it. I ask for the sword Zülfikar, the heirloom of Manas my forefather; and for the charmed lance cast by the master Bölökbay. With those in my hands, the rest is the work of my arm.

Kanıkey had the chests opened; Zülfikar, the legacy of Manas — its scabbard worked with green thread of gold, its hilt of white silver — was brought forth; the charmed lance of Bölökbay's making, its point of star-iron, was shouldered. Bakay lifted both his hands, opened his withered, twig-thin fingers to the sky:

— My Creator, — he said, — give the strength of Manas to this girl's arm. Cast Sarıbay down, and raise my child above him!

✦ ✦ ✦

On the day after the wedding, before the preparations for the campaign, Bakay performed his last great labor. He had himself carried out before the ordo and set upon the golden throne; the people gathered, the children sat in front. The old man closed his eyes and called by name, one by one, the forty companions who had passed beyond — the forty comrades of Manas:

— Sırgak, my lion, arrow-swift of death! Where are you — come! Çubak, master of the strength none could withstand, come! Acıbay, my honey-tongued envoy, come! Kırgıl, old wolf, come! All forty of you, come forty times over! From the snows of the Ala-Too, from the waters of Talas, from the far migration you have gone upon — return; be a shield on forty sides to this girl, to this child of mine, Kuyalı! Be the road before her horse and the mist behind it, the rock at her right hand and the cliff at her left! Guard this homeland, the great-hearted one's trust, one last time!

And the people saw — some tell it with oaths, some only shake their heads — that in that moment a wind passed over the ordo, the felt door-flaps stirred of themselves, and a rumbling was heard like the hooves of forty horsemen, though no horse was seen. Bakay opened his eyes and smiled; then he keened his own lament over his own decline: — Once I was, and now am not; I was a black mountain, and am leveled plain; I was a poplar, and am

withered; I buried Manas, I gave Semetey his secret, I showed Seytek the road; now my soul no longer fits its vessel... — The lament ended, and the great old man collapsed upon the golden throne; they thought him dead, but he had not died — yet he was making ready now for the last migration, and everyone understood it. The women wept without sound, the men bowed their heads; for if Bakay went, the last stone remaining from the age of Manas would be shaken from its place. Seytek took the old man's hand into his palms and pressed that dry, dry hand to his brow: — Grandfather, do not go; I have not yet taken all that is owed me from you. — Bakay smiled without opening his eyes: — You have taken what was owed, my child; you carry it in your blood. I am only paying my debt.

In that sorrowful stillness Kanıkey took up the word. The wife of Manas, the mother of Semetey, patience itself turned to stone, she spoke before the people perhaps for the last time:

— Now let me tell you a dream, that you may see the thread of fate, — she said. — Years ago, on a Night of Power, in Buhara, Kıdır entered my dream in the guise of a dervish. He said: "Kanıkey, my daughter, your son Semetey shall be a great lord; three wives are written upon his brow. One is Çaçıkey, the shadow of his youth; one is Ayçürök, his white swan, the crown of his life; and the third shall come to him on his darkest day — her name is Kuyalı, his own bride of the Last Day, the deliverer of his homeland." Forty years I carried that dream in my heart like a stone, and told no one. Now the day has come, and the stone has found its tongue. Kuyalı did not fall to us from the sky; she came from fate. Let no one harbor doubt within: this marriage was sealed on the Night of Power long ago — we have only now read its blessing aloud.

A murmur ran through the people; doubt died, and faith stood upright. The women scattered white sweets along Kuyalı's path, the old men struck their hands upon their knees and said — so it is, this is how the weave of fate is worked — and even the children forgot the hunger in their bellies that day.

In those days the ordo learned one secret more. It seemed that Bakay, at the very start of the siege, had secretly sent out Acıbay, the envoy who knew seventy tongues — the one old man still living of the forty companions — to know the enemy in his own land, to look into the heart of Celpiniş. On his return Acıbay told of that journey with his own lips, and as he told it sweat crept down the necks of the listeners. The fortress of Celpiniş had six gates: at the first gate forty sentries, at the second forty jailers; but the true wardens were the others: at one gate lay the scorpion Salagün, tall as a camel, its tail a sword, its eye a live coal;

at another coiled the serpent Karamar, its breath poison, its forked tongue the height of a man. By the cunning of seventy tongues, now in a merchant's guise, now a dervish's, Acıbay had passed through all six of the six gates; he had seen Sarıbay's treasury, the number of his host, the weak stone of his fortress, and returned. — This enemy, — said Acıbay, — is a mountain in his own land; but even a mountain has its pass. I have seen his pass, and when the day comes I will name it. For now know this much: Sarıbay did not leave his rear unguarded when he marched from his land; but he brought his heart with him. Whatever his heart is, that is his weak stone — and his heart is his wrath. A man in wrath forgets himself; and he who forgets himself is felled not by the arm, but by the mind.

Then it was Kuyalı's turn; the people wished to hear from her own lips the lioness for whom they would fight. Kuyalı stepped into the midst of the ordo; she neither shrank nor boasted; she told it like the flowing of water: the land of Kayıpçal, the seven-year pursuit, the oath sworn with Ayçürök in the heavens, the dream of Kıdır, the reason of her coming to Talas. She bound up her speech thus:

— I do not say I will not enter the field alone; alone I would enter it. But this cause is not the cause of one alone. I ask two companions at my side: let one be Külçoro — for none knows Sarıbay's stroke better than he; let one be Seytek — for the spirit of the ancestors rests most heavily upon him. If we three come in from three sides, we shall bring him down, though he be a mountain.

The people consented with one voice; and the great arming began.

Külçoro was clothed in the Akolpok that Kanıkey had stitched with her own hands: that arrow-proof kaftan in whose every stitch was a prayer, in whose every layer a sleepless night. Kanıkey's hands trembled as she dressed him; once she had clothed Semetey in that same kaftan, and before that had sewn another for Manas; the prayer of one needle had covered the backs of three generations. Over it was drawn the Kandagay, made from the hides of mountain goats brought down by forty hunters; no sword cuts it, no spear pierces it. And for Seytek was brought the steed Kulansur, found as if from the unseen world: none knew from whose herds he had come — his mane dun, his eye fire, his neigh like the call of a war-horn; when the young hero's hand touched the mane his heart leapt in his breast, and the horse snuffed at him and knew him, as though it had waited for its master since the beginning of time. About Seytek's shoulders was fastened the Akolpok left from Manas; the grandfather's kaftan stretched taut across the grandson's back as if its measure had been cut for him.

Kanıkey and Bakay, one standing, one upon his bed, opened their hands; they called upon the spirits of the ancestors in their long succession: — From Böyön Han to Çayan, from Çayan to Bala Han, from him to Nogoy, from Nogoy to Kara Han, from Kara Han to Cakıp, from Cakıp to great-hearted Manas! O chain of the fathers, O strap that cannot be broken! Your descendants ride out to the field; let their arms be your arms, their hearts your hearts! — A white-gray mare was sacrificed to Baabedin; her blood went to the earth, her prayer to the sky. Twelve holy elders were brought, and the twelve laid their hands upon the heads of all three and gave the blessing.

And one morning, as the horizon paled toward dawn, three riders went out from Talas. In front rode Kuyalı, Zülfikar at her waist, the charmed lance in her hand, beneath her a horse swift as her own wind; at her right Külçoro, in Akolpok and Kandagay, his wounds bound but his back straight; at her left Seytek, upon Kulansur, his grandfather's kaftan on his shoulders, the golden-cheeked crescent-axe at his crupper. Semetey came out to see them off; his wounds could be read in his face, and he laid his horse's rein in Kuyalı's hand: — My bride of the Last Day, in this world I have nothing to give you; I shall pay in the hereafter. Come back alive. — Ayçürök kissed her friend's stirrup; the white swan and the lioness looked at one another for the last time, and no word was needed between them. Sarıbay had drawn his siege back a stage and had built a fortress of stone at the mouth of Kapka-Taş, and there he had entrenched himself; the three riders turned toward that stone fortress.

The road was three days' riding. On the first day they passed through burned encampments: overturned cauldrons, felts gone to ash, a foal left masterless. Seytek took the foal on a lead, and no one said a word. On the second day the steppe was empty; only a pair of eagles wheeled and wheeled in the sky, and Kuyalı lifted her head to look and said — the eyes of the forty companions are upon us; those whom Bakay my father summoned have come. — The third halt lay one stage from Kapka-Taş.

The road is where a man pours out his soul. At that last halt, by the fire, Külçoro turned to Kuyalı; that hardened companion, that man who had not bent even in the years of bondage, lowered his voice:

— Lioness, sister of mine, — he said, — I will tell you a thing I have told no one to this day. Seven months I traded lance-blows with this enemy. I broke seventy lances, I wore out seven layers of armor; by night I fought him in my dreams, by day in my flesh. And in seven months, not once — not one single time — did I shake him in his saddle. I am the son of

Almambet; my father made Beecin tremble, and I overthrew the tyranny of Kançoro; I used to say I did not know what fear was. But before this enemy I saw my arm come back empty, and for the first time — the first time — I felt that I had grown old. Why do I tell you this? For this reason: look for no hope from us. We will be your shield, we will be your road; if we die, we die before you. But the arm that will bring Sarıbay down is, on this field, yours and yours alone. You are the last hope, sister. Strike knowing it.

Kuyalı gazed into the fire; in the flames she seemed to see tomorrow's field. Then she lifted her head and smiled; in that smile was neither pride nor fear, only the ease of a lioness who has accepted her fate:

— Elder brother Kül, — she said, — an arm that has broken seventy lances is no empty arm; those lances have eaten at Sarıbay's strength for seven months — without knowing it, you have wearied him for me. You opened the road, Seytek held the ember, and I shall tread out the fire. Kıdır my father did not appear to me in vain. Tomorrow, before Kapka-Taş, if God grants it, the line of Celmoguz and the line of Manas shall meet for the last time.

They spoke no more until the fire had burned down to ash. Far off in the night the stone fortress of Kapka-Taş stood like a black fist; enemy fires burned upon its ramparts, and the growling of Celmayan carried all the way to the camp. Before he slept, Seytek stroked the golden cheek of the crescent-axe and called inwardly to his grandfather: Great-hearted grandsire, tomorrow is the day of the field; do not withhold your spirit from us. Above the steppe the stars turned, a redness crept toward the place of dawn; and three heroes, and the fate of a homeland, waited within that redness for the morning of the lances that would break.

CHAPTER 40

The Spirit of the Ancestors and the Broken Lance

— ❖ —

Dawn was still far off; the night had settled over Talas like a black felt, and even the stars seemed to peer timidly through the pores of that felt. The fires of the encampment were going out one by one, and those who sat by the fires that still burned could not bring themselves to speak; for everyone knew that the battle that would break tomorrow was like neither the battles of yesterday nor the slaughters of years gone by. The one who would come against them tomorrow was Sarıbay, spawn of Celmoguz: the bloodthirsty one who had thrown the eighteen thousand worlds into tumult, who cut off heads as a man cuts a sheep's throat, who split open bellies as a man splits a melon. Even the horses seemed to sense it; the herds grew restless, the steeds neighed at midnight for no cause, and having neighed, took fright at their own voices.

Nor did the warrior Seytek sleep. Inside his gray yurt, kneeling upon the felt, he gazed at the weapons spread before him: the lance handed down from his forefathers, the bow left him by his father, the Zülfikar left from Manas. All three were silent; but there was a word in their silence, and the boy strove to spell it out. At thirteen he had learned his lineage, at thirteen he had taken his first vengeance, returning to Talas to settle the account of Kançoro; he had seen his father Semetey, spellbound in the black cavern, come back to speech, and had learned that even the dead may speak. But tomorrow's work was another matter. What would come against him tomorrow was not a man but a calamity in the shape of a man; and Seytek, gazing and gazing at his weapons, asked himself: if iron does not bite, what will? He did not know the answer; and the knowing that he did not know settled that night upon his shoulders like a mountain.

Külçoro did not sleep that night. He parted the felt door of his gray yurt and went out, stood a while beneath the starless sky, and then his feet carried him to Kuyalı's pavilion. The daughter of Kayıpçal, Kuyalı the lioness, sat by the fire, testing one by one the rings of the mail spread across her knee. Külçoro stopped at the threshold; he lowered his voice, but in the lowered voice there was pleading, and at the bottom of the pleading, the fate of a homeland.

— Sister, he said, lioness, cub of Kayıpçal. I have a word for you; if you will not hear it, it will fester in me, and if you hear it, perhaps the death of a homeland may be turned back. Sarıbay's poison has seeped into the waters of Talas; the hearths are out, the cradles overturned, and the bird of death circling over the bewildered Kirghiz is looking now for a branch to light upon. The line of Manas is down to a handful: one warrior, Seytek, and this man before you whose tendons were carved out. Give us the arrow-fight in plenty, sister. They carved my tendons, but they could not carve out my heart; if you stand beside us, I will grow again from the place where I was broken.

Kuyalı did not lift her head. She tested one more ring of the mail, then threw a stick of kindling on the fire; as the flame rose her face showed — and in that face there was neither fear nor hesitation, only the petrified patience of an old reckoning.

— Külçoro, she said, do not tell me of Sarıbay. I have known him longer than you have. I was a girl, my hair in braids, my wrist yet untried; that spawn of Celmoguz fastened himself upon Celpiniş and strode through my homeland swinging his arms. He drove off our herds, filled our wells with stones, cast his noose at our daughters. My father Kayıpçal was sick in those days; our men looked into one another's faces saying "who will wrestle

with this?" — and no one stepped forward. I stepped forward. They laughed; "does a girl take up wrestling?" they said. Sarıbay laughed too; his laughter lasted until the end of his laughing. They say we grappled three days and three nights; it is a lie, it did not last three days — but it seemed three years to me, and it must have seemed so to him. In the end I caught his waist and brought his knee to the ground; I bound his hands with his own noose and drove him beyond the borders of Celpiniş. As I drove him out he tried to spit in my face, and the spittle fell in his own beard. Since that day he has honed his hatred; since that day, wherever he goes there is chaos behind him and slaughter before him. It is he who loosed this scourge upon the land; it has been he since that very day. And now you tell me: enter the war. Shall I learn from you how to enter a war, brother-in-law? I suckled battle in the cradle.

She rose to her feet; she shook out the mail, and the rings sang with one voice. She drew it over her shoulders, cinched her sash, gathered her braids beneath her helmet. In the firelight she loomed like a giant; yet not with the ugly menace of giants, but with the grave majesty of mountains.

— Go and sleep, she said. Tomorrow is the day of the lance. He who enters the day of the lance sleepless, his hand trembles.

Külçoro went out; but he did not sleep. He could not; for he had seen what Sarıbay was, and one who had seen could not sleep.

Happy was he who had never seen Sarıbay. Those who had seen him would tell of it, and those who heard would not believe: it was said he had ridden nine elephants and broken the backs of all nine. His height was like the skirt of a mountain, his shadow like a covering over a whole clan's grazing lands. His kaftan was woven with a charm no arrow could pierce; the horse beneath him was of a breed no arrow could overtake — Tookızıl they called that horse, a red-maned, bloody-eyed creature. He had drunk up the khans who came against him as a man drinks kumiss, had struck off the heads of envoys upon the road, had scattered whole vast armies like lambs strayed from the flock. Since coming to Talas he had been putting out the hearth of the Kirghiz: the hearth that smoked yesterday was ash today, the child that laughed yesterday an orphan today, the sack brimming with kumiss yesterday was riddled with holes today. His mouth opened like a wolf's mouth, they said, and when it opened, fire seeped from beneath it; some believed this and some did not, but those who had seen him on the field had come to believe everything.

There were those who brought news from the places he had passed; as the messengers told it their tongues tangled and their hands shook. They would tell of an encampment: at evening forty hearths smoked there, by morning all forty were ash. They would tell of a mountain pass: its snows crimson, and the crimson not melting until spring. They would tell of a caravan out of Şooruk's country: its camels had gone out laden, and the loads came back masterless. Before Sarıbay all who could flee were fleeing; he who could not flee knelt, and he who knelt was not spared — for the spawn of Celmoguz held the kneeling and the standing as one, and felled both with a single sword. "He threw the eighteen thousand worlds into tumult," the old men said; and that saying, which for any other hero would be counted praise, was for him a mere tally, a dry sum.

And in that extremity, in that blackest of nights, a voice came from the unseen world.

Whether the earth trembled first or the sky thundered, no one could tell. Then, above the encampment, out of the clouds, there broke a war-cry so great that the mountains could not bear its echo and passed it from one to another:

— Ride, children, ride!

It was the voice of great-hearted Manas. It had broken loose from the far side of death, from the silence of the hidden tomb. And the voice did not come alone: among the clouds horsemen appeared — half-seen, not to be told from smoke or from light, yet horsemen whose hoofbeats pounded like a heart. Foremost rode the gray-maned lion Manas; at his right Almambet, at his left Çubak, behind him Sırgak swift as the wind; and behind them, ranged like forty stars, the spirits of the forty companions. Seytek saw it, and his flesh stood up in gooseflesh; Külçoro saw it, and in the place of his carved-out tendons he felt the ache of his old strength; Kuyalı saw it, and the rings of her mail seemed to sing of themselves. In the encampment some fell prostrate, some wept, some drew their swords and kissed them. An old shepherd, who in his youth had gone on the Great Campaign and come back alive, felt his knees give way beneath him when that cry touched his ear, and from where he sat he sobbed, "Ayköl!" — "The great-hearted one has come, children; the great-hearted one has not left his foals alone!" Mothers lifted their babies from the cradles and held them up to the sky; let him see, they said, let him see and tell it to his grandchildren. That night fear died in the encampment; and in fear's place settled something far heavier yet far more alive — the sense of a debt. The spirits of the ancestors had become their fellow travelers; they were no longer alone in this fight, and he who is not alone has no face left for fleeing.

Seytek had come out of his gray yurt and was gazing at the sky. Külçoro came to his side; the two stood silent a while. Then the boy, without taking his eyes from the shadows in the clouds, asked:

— Was that my father's father, ake?

— It was, said Külçoro. That was his voice, that was his war-cry. I heard of that cry from those who returned from the Great Campaign; those who had heard it, they said, never feared any sound again.

— Then I shall fear no more, said Seytek; and it was as he said.

That night by the fire Külçoro loosed his tongue. Perhaps the coming of the spirits loosed it, perhaps the chance of tomorrow's death; whatever it was, he brought out one by one the stones he had buried in his heart for years.

— I am, he said, the son of Almambet; but what truly raised me was the shadow of my elder brother Semetey. Kançoro and I grew up together in that shadow; I called him my own brother, I shared my bread with him, I turned my back to him — does one turn one's back to a brother? It seems one does. He struck not at my back but at the tendons of my heels. When my brother Semetey vanished into mystery I was left in the hands of Kıyaz; the knife that Kançoro's counsel guided carved out my tendons. After that I was Külçoro no longer; they called me Denekul, they called me slave, they called me chattel. Nine years, sister — nine years I hauled firewood for Kıyaz's ordo. Wood on my back, an ache in my feet, a dead name in my heart. In winter I brought green wood down from the mountain and my hands split open; in summer I gathered dry thorns, and they looked into my face and no one knew the old Külçoro. And yet what the old Külçoro had been, if only they knew! When we rode with my brother Semetey to win Ayçürök, I rode in front; when we plunged into the host of Çınkoco and Toltoy, it was I who opened the way. When we went out against Konurbay I was at my brother's right hand; when the arrows rained it was I who was his shield, when the pass was held it was I who charged first. When the sack of kumiss came round, the first draught was mine; when death came round, the first place in line was mine — that is what it is to be a companion, and that is what I was. Kıyaz's dog-blooded men did not know it; had they known, they could not have loaded my back with the world itself, let alone firewood. But I knew. Under every load of wood I said to myself: you were Semetey's right arm, you were the hero who rode horses of Akkula's line, who was first to go out against Konurbay. Do not forget, I said. I did not forget.

The fire crackled; no one broke in upon his words.

— And now, said Külçoro, every day of those nine years has become a whetstone; nine years I have been honing the sword of this war. Tomorrow I will be first onto the field. Let no one go before me. Let me trade lances first, that no thorn be left in my heart. If my strength suffices, so much the better; if it does not — he turned his face to Kuyalı, and for a moment his voice thinned like a child's — if it does not, sister, then save us, you. I give Seytek into your keeping; I give the unfailing seed of Manas into your keeping. Hold this word as an oath.

Kuyalı bowed her head in assent; it was the heavy assent of those unaccustomed to giving their word, and it was firmer than any vow.

In those same hours, on the far side, fires burned in Sarıbay's encampment too; but around those fires there was no song, no prayer, only fear. Sarıbay had come out before his pavilion and was roaring at his own army and at the Kirghiz beyond the darkness:

— It was Manas who slaughtered my father! Did you think the blood of my father Celmoguz would lie unavenged? I will exact that blood from the Kirghiz down to the last hair! For Celpiniş, for shame, for honor — I will leave no stone upon stone, no head upon shoulders! I will cut them down to the babe in the cradle and the crone in the corner; I will foul the waters of Talas with blood and make its very name forgotten!

His voice boomed through the night like a hideous ogre's drum; even his own soldiers could not look one another in the eye. For most of those soldiers had not come of their own will; they had been torn from their encampments with the whip and driven to death as sheep are driven. One among them, a white-locked old man, whispered by the fire to the man beside him: "What quarrel have we with the Kirghiz? Our grain stands in the field, and our sons die in a foreign land." The man beside him made no answer; in Sarıbay's army the price of an answer was a head. Sarıbay slept without ever taking the arrow-proof kaftan from his back; he had Tookızıl tethered at the foot of his pavilion, and even in his sleep never let the haft of his crescent-axe out of his palm. Such was the enemy who had come; and the dawn, as if for this very reason, began that morning to break with shame.

✦ ✦ ✦

Words were done; the turn had come to the lance.

Külçoro brought his yellow-cheeked whip down once upon his charger's haunch, and the horse shot forward like an arrow loosed from the bow. The emptiness between the two armies — that field of death no man dared set foot upon — belonged in an instant to a single rider. But was he a single rider? Those who saw it would swear he was not: at Külçoro's right and left, above him and behind him, rode shadows on horses of smoke. Gray-maned Manas was reaching out a lance; Almambet was reaching, Çubak was reaching, Sırgak and Sergek were reaching; even the spirits of Acıbay and white-bearded Bakay stretched out their arms from between the two worlds and lent strength to the shaft of that one lance. Seven layers of spirit, one layer of flesh: so Külçoro came down onto the field. While the wind howled in his ears, every day of the nine years passed before his eyes: the loads of firewood, the weals of the whip, the mouths that had called him Denekul. He gathered them all onto the point of his lance; no spearhead in the world could be as sharp as the nine-year hatred of a slave.

The lance in his hand was an heirloom of father and forefather: charmed steel cast by the master Bölökbay. That master forged iron with prayer and tempered it with oaths; a spearhead from his hand pierces stone and splits rock, they said. Külçoro aimed this lance at Sarıbay's mortal places: at the crown of the heart, at the border of the paired ribs, at the gate of the soul. He loaded the shaft with all the speed of his steed, all the hatred of nine years, all the strength of forty spirits, and drove it home.

The lance shattered to pieces in the middle against the swine's body.

The crack was heard by both armies at once. The charmed steel had snapped like dry reed, its fragments flashing once in the sun before they scattered on the earth. And Sarıbay stood without a hair stirring, as though what had touched his body were not a lance but a fly of a summer evening. Slowly he turned his head and looked at Külçoro; in that look there was not even mockery — mockery is for one who has met his equal.

Külçoro's heart wrenched once, and once more turned to steel. He reached to his waist; he drew Zülfikar, the inheritance of Manas, from its sheath. That sword had gone to Beecin at the gray-maned lion's belt and come back; it had flashed like lightning upon the crowns of many a champion. Külçoro wheeled his horse and plunged in again; gripping Zülfikar in both hands he struck at the giant's neck, his shoulder, his ribs — struck once, struck twice, struck a third time. At every fall the sword threw sparks, as though it struck not stone but lightning itself. Still death would not bite this infidel. Sarıbay shook himself; and at his shaking Külçoro's horse staggered three paces.

— A fly, said Sarıbay. His voice seemed to come from beneath the earth. A fly that presumes to sting me.

And he turned savage. From his crupper he took his bronze mace, big as a tent; into his other hand he fitted his silver-hafted crescent-axe. But his course was no longer toward Külçoro; he had fixed his bloody eye ahead and found the warrior Seytek standing before the ranks. There was the seed of Manas; there was the root to be torn out and dried. He spurred Tookızıl; the horse, true to its name, poured forward like a red flame. Sarıbay's mouth opened — opened like a wolf's mouth — and those who saw it swore that conflagration streamed from that mouth, that the grasses scorched where his breath touched. With the terror of a dragon, scouring all before him, he bore down upon Seytek.

Seytek did not flee. The warrior who had learned his lineage at thirteen, who had taken his first vengeance before his mustache had darkened, turned his horse's head toward the giant; he raised his shield, he leveled his lance. In the emptiness between the two armies, the two horses came together. The first blow was the giant's: the bronze mace came down like the thundering of the sky. Seytek reined hard and made his horse spring to the left; the mace came down on the ground where the boy had stood a moment before, and opened a pit in the earth the size of a cauldron. The giant wheeled, the horse wheeled; the second blow came. This time Seytek did not evade it but met it: the bronze mace fell upon the shield; the shield rang, the arm went numb, the horse sank to its knees — but Seytek did not fall. The crescent-axe spun in the air like a flame; Seytek ducked, and the axe passed like wind over the crest of his helmet. Again, and again; the giant struck, the boy slipped aside; the giant roared, the boy held firm. The two armies had forgotten to breathe, watching this wrestling such as had never been seen: a mountain wrestled with a sapling, and the sapling did not break.

And it was then that the worm entered the giant.

Sarıbay, in all his days upon the earth, had never seen one who struck against the wall of his strength and stood; khans had knelt before him, armies had melted before him. Now there stood facing him a tender boy so few years out of the cradle, and his mace would not bite him, his crescent-axe could not find him. In his unconquerable body, for the first time in his life, he felt the strength ebbing; he felt his arm growing heavy, his breath growing short. He drew back and paused a moment; and he muttered to himself, in a voice both armies could hear:

— God has struck me, surely. My strength does not suffice against a boy scarce out of swaddling; God has struck me, surely.

Then, after the custom of giants, he took the shame of that weakness out on everything but himself. He vomited his rage upon Tookızıl beneath him; he brought the whip down between the beast's ears and rained curses upon it:

— Move, you stumbling wretch! I mounted you for a steed of steeds; it seems I have been riding a frog! I will flay your red hide and make a drum of you; I will give your carcass to the crows!

Tookızıl reared in pain; and that rearing snapped the drawn cord of the two armies.

The ranks crashed together. First the war-cries rose from both sides — from one side "Manas! Manas!", from the other a roar of mingled tongues and mingled peoples whose fear alone was one. Then the earth was beaten like a drum beneath thousands of hooves. Bows were drawn like rain; clouds of arrows passed before the sun in black squalls. Fuses were lit, muskets boomed, and the echo of the mountains piled thunder upon thunder. The captains mowed like sickles; he who fled flew onto the arrow, he who stood fell upon the sword. Horse was parted from horse, man torn from man; who was friend and who was foe could no longer be told in the dust. Severed heads rolled on the ground like melons; masterless herds scattered over the steppe, and the souls that wandered moaning multiplied; the wounded bound one another's wounds, and the hands that yellowed with the yellow sickness grew many and more. That day Kuyalı moved through the slaughter like a flame; her lance did not come back empty from where it plunged, and no companion her shield covered was given up to death. Külçoro, his lance broken, his sword blunted, still did not leave the ranks; that day he made the enemy lines pay out Denekul's nine years installment by installment. Nor were the spirits of the ancestors absent from the field: at the narrowest place, in the most hopeless moment, there were those who saw the horsemen of smoke pass by, and where they passed, the back of the Kirghiz straightened. The steppe drank blood until evening; and the earth that drank blood turned black.

Night fell; even in the darkness the slaughter did not wholly cease. Fires were kindled, the dead were counted; the voices of the counters failed, and the count did not end. A wounded warrior drew a skin of kumiss from his breast and held it out to the dying man beside him; the dying man could not drink, the kumiss ran down his chin, and the warrior wept. A mother searched for her son among the dead; she did not find him, and at first rejoiced that she did not, and then walked the passes until morning. Such was the night; it

was one of those nights when even the wolf is ashamed to howl. At the end of the bloody night the dawn wind blew — that wind which stings the face, which opens wounds, which whispers into the hearts of the living the names of the dead, one by one. The morning star blazed above the eastern hill; and in that very half-light, across the field of death between the two armies, came a single rider.

He was an envoy; but it was as if he had no mouth — he was mute. He gave no greeting and spoke no word; he only held out his hand. In his palm lay a letter no bigger than a palm. Seytek had the letter taken and read aloud. The writing was short, and as venomous as it was short: it named the place of combat and summoned him to the field at sunrise; and beneath it stood a single line of threat — if your foe's death-hour overtakes you, you are dead.

The mute envoy went as he had come. Behind him, in the red of the dawn horizon, the battle of the new day was fermenting.

✦ ✦ ✦

The sun rose; and the field, this time, belonged to Kuyalı.

The lioness, armored, her helmet laced, had ridden her horse into the middle of the two armies. There she halted; she struck her shield against the shaft of her lance, struck it three times; and her voice came down upon Sarıbay's encampment like an avalanche breaking from the mountain:

— I am Kuyalı the champion! Daughter of Kayıpçal, shield of Celpiniş, the battle come to meet your face! I am the very core of wrath; I summon you, spawn of Celmoguz — to wrestling if you say wrestling, to the arrow if you say arrow, to the coal that blackens and burns if you say coal! I was a girl, and I defeated you; I bound your hands with your own noose and drove you from my land. That day you fled; year upon year you fled; and at every flight you left behind you a burned encampment, a slaughtered flock. Today you shall not flee! Today you are beneath my chin; let the field of battle be too narrow for the two of us!

The enemy she had hunted for years stood at last before her; Kuyalı's heart was full to the brim, and in her voice there was something terrible that resembled joy. She turned her horse toward the Kirghiz ranks and cried out her testament to those who stood there:

— The warrior dies; the name remains! If I die in this wrestling, say "our true champion is dead," and mourn me; but do not cut off hope! A homeland that cuts off hope dies twice! Bury my bones not in Celpiniş but in Talas; let me lie in the earth of Manas, so that whenever the name of Celmoguz's spawn is spoken, my bones may laugh!

Then she turned her horse's head to the enemy once more and rode forward, alone, to the place of single combat.

Sarıbay came out before his encampment; he came out, but he did not take up the challenge. The giant's mouth spread wide, and an ugly grin appeared:

— Is it you, then? he said. Aged girl! An aged girl with frost fallen on her hair and affectation mixed into her speech! Why should I brawl with you? My cause is with khans; my vengeance is with the spawn of Manas. Go, spin wool; go, boil your cauldron. Kuyalı, indeed! Daughter of Kayıpçal, indeed! I am Sarıbay who broke the backs of nine elephants; I have no day to spare for wrestling with girls.

But at the bottom of the scornful voice there was a thin crack; an attentive ear could hear it. For Sarıbay had not forgotten — giants do not forget defeat, they only bury it. The ache of the wrists bound with his own noose at the border of Celpiniş still stirred, after all these years, on rainy nights. That was why he did not take up the wrestling; that was why he said "I have no cause to brawl with you." There was cause, and of the greatest; but to speak that cause's name was to dig defeat up out of its grave.

He swaggered; and as he swaggered his hand went to the whip — but the whip came down not on Kuyalı, on his own army. He drove his massed soldiers forward with contempt; lashing the ranks he drove those who did not wish to die toward death, those who did not wish to slaughter toward slaughter. And the slaughter went on: Sarıbay's columns fell without mercy upon Kirghiz and Turk; encampments burned, and the passes clotted with blood.

The warrior Seytek watched from a rise; on his young face was a reckoning older than his years. He turned to those beside him; his voice was low, but its weight was heavy:

— Talas is no easy place, he said; were it an easy place, my grandfather Manas would not have set his ordo here. Kuyalı my aunt is a woman, but she is no easy warrior; the swine who takes her lightly will learn the price of it. Yet let us not fog our own eyes with hatred: the son of Celmoguz is no common lion. The lance broke, Zülfikar did not cut; then this enemy will be measured not against iron, but against his appointed hour. Let us order the

battle so that the homeland is sheltered from the worst of this death: let the women, the children, the old withdraw to the mountain arm; let the right wing hold the pass, the left wing hold the water; let the field belong to single combats.

It was ordered as he said. The women, the children, the white beards withdrew to the mountain arm of Keñ-Kol; the right wing held the throat of the pass, the left wing held the fords of the water. Kuyalı remained on the field; Külçoro would not ask for a new lance in place of his broken one — "it is not my lance that broke; let it be his charm that broke," he said, and girded on his bow and his sword. And in the very midst of the slaughter, a door opened that no one had expected.

A detachment broke away from the enemy ranks; at their head was Çañdayak, the fiercest of the army Sarıbay had driven forth, a man whose name was on every tongue. He had thrown his weapon to the ground before he came; he dismounted, clasped his hands before the warrior Seytek, and set his knee to the earth:

— We are slaves fallen into your hands, he said; spare us one spoonful of our blood. We are a people who sow grain and nourish life; Sarıbay tore us from our homeland by force and drove us with the whip. It was he who drove our sons, who were not dying, to death, and our encampments, which were not burning, to the fire; the whole sin is on his neck. Do not enter into the blood of a guiltless people, warrior Seytek; if you spare us and leave us alive, our poplar shall be your standard, let our hearth smoke beside your hearth; we swear it — upon our bread and our salt we swear it.

Seytek looked long and long at this white-locked, weary-faced man; in his face he saw the face of his own homeland — the face of a people driven, despised, whose only crime was to lie in the road. He stretched out his hand and raised Çañdayak from the ground:

— Rise, he said. The line of Manas does not strike a sword at one whose hands are clasped. Your blood is spared; let your encampments be pitched beside ours, let your cauldron boil. But know this: blood once spared, if sold, flows twice.

— It shall not be sold, said Çañdayak; and that day one wing of Sarıbay's army silently melted away.

Now the reckoning stood alone; the veils had fallen one by one, and in the middle of the field there remained only two shadows: a swine thick with tyranny, and a boy who had become a man at thirteen. Seytek tightened his horse's girth with his own hand; he laced his helmet; he looked one by one at Külçoro, at Kuyalı, at the companions still living — not as

one taking leave, but as one giving something into their keeping. Then he raised his voice; and that voice was no longer a child's voice, it was the echo of the voice of Manas upon the rocks of Talas:

— My grandfather Manas did not weigh his fate when he rode to Beecin; my father Semetey did not count his days when he went out against Konurbay. Shall I count mine? If fate allows it, let me die; let me measure myself and see! To meet this swine in single combat is the debt upon my neck; let him who plots against the seed of Manas find the seed itself before him. I swear that from this field I shall either return with my vengeance taken, or leave my name as a keepsake to my homeland.

At that moment the Kirghiz ranks surged like water; some wept, some cried out, the old men opened their hands and prayed: "May Kıdır be your companion, may the çilten spread their wings over you; may your grandfather's spirit walk before you, son!" Mothers who for days had forgotten how to weep learned weeping anew that day; a homeland that for days had been preparing to bury hope saw hope standing upright upon the shoulders of a boy of thirteen. Kuyalı rode her horse up beside Seytek and said only this, in a low voice: "I am here." Külçoro still held the shaft of his broken lance in his hand; he raised that shaft into the air — like the sign of an oath broken but not relinquished.

On the far side Sarıbay heard this vow. He heard it, and the hidden worm within him stirred once more; but the giant strangled his worm with his rage. He hauled at Tookızıl's rein and wheeled the beast; the arrow-proof kaftan flashed once in the sun like darkness itself. His mouth opened — opened like a wolf's mouth, like a chasm — and fire poured from beneath it; his breath scorched the grasses of the field from afar. He gripped his silver-hafted crescent-axe; in that grip were all the backs the nine elephants had broken beneath him, all the hearths he had extinguished, all the heads he had cut. He drove Tookızıl to the gallop.

The red horse poured onto the field like a red flame; the earth torn up by its hooves hung in the air like a black rain. Seytek too sent his horse forward. Two clouds of dust moved toward each other; two armies, two shores, two worlds held their breath. In the sky, behind the clouds, there were those who saw a gray-maned shadow spur its horse; and that war-cry — "Ride, children, ride!" — echoed once more, in the hearts alone as some tell it, in very truth as others do.

The crescent-axe turned in the air; the sun broke one last time on its silver haft. And the two shadows, in the very center of the field, were about to come together.

CHAPTER 41

The Dying Hurricane and the White Beard's Prayer

— ❖ —

That morning the sun did not rise over the stony valley of Talas. Perhaps it rose, but no one saw it; for from the eastern shore a cloud of dust lifted that stitched sky to earth, and mid-morning turned to twilight. The horse herds neighed and scattered up the slopes, the felt doors of the grey yurts opened one by one, and the white-bearded elders came out onto their thresholds, shading their eyes with their hands. From within the dust cloud came first the neighing of a horse; no, it was not the neighing of a horse — it was as if a mountain were coughing. Then the cloud split apart and Tookızıl appeared, and on his back, Sarıbay of the ogre's blood.

Sarıbay was the son of Celmoguz; his mother a giantess, and he himself a calamity. Wherever he passed he had left no khan standing; on the point of his lance he had rotted many a famous head, burned encampments, and driven the herds before him. His shield was of nine ox-hides, his armor of black iron, his heart harder than stone. He had come

winding his way to Talas, mowing down the khans in his path; now he stood at the threshold of Manas's homeland, beating his chest and roaring:

— If any seed of Manas remains, let him come out and face me! They say Semetey has vanished into mystery; they say he left a son, a child. If he is a child, I will crush him cradle and all; if he is a man, I will dig his grave here!

This word swept from camp to camp like a black wind. Some warriors reached for their horses; some mothers felt the strength go out of their knees. Seytek, who sat in the ordo — a boy of thirteen, yet taller than a grown man, his gaze keener than an eagle's — rose slowly from his place when he heard that cry. No one said anything; there was no need to speak. The swift Kulansur was saddled, the white armor was girded on, the white turban left from Manas was wound about his head. Ayçürök looked into her son's face; in her gaze there was fear, and there was also a dignity worthy of the swan-born. She said only this:

— May the road of your forefathers lie open before you, dark of my eye. You do not go alone; the dead go with you.

Seytek did not understand these words then. Later he understood.

As he rode out to the field, the people had lined the way; some murmured silent prayers, some touched his hem, his stirrup, laying their hands upon them for good fortune. An aged mother at the edge of the road loosened her white headscarf and waved it in the air, crying out in her cracked voice: "May Manas's road be your road, may Manas's blessing be your blessing, my foal!" Seytek turned and looked; in that mother's eyes he seemed to see all his dead forefathers at once. He tightened Kulansur's rein, bent his head forward, and rode down into the field.

When Kulansur and Tookızıl came face to face upon the field, the earth shook once. The two tulpars regarded each other from the far edge of sight, their ears standing up like swords, and then in a single breath they broke into a charge. The lances came down first upon their chests; the black iron armor was torn away strip by strip, the rim of Seytek's white armor was split, but the points did not reach flesh. At the second onset the lances shattered with a crack at their middles, the fragments hurled skyward. They seized their axes; wherever axe met axe sparks rained down, hafts snapped, edges blunted. Sword came against sword; the swords did not endure either, crumbling like autumn ice. The weapons were spent; the fury was not. They cast lassos, they wrenched at each other's wrists, they strove on horseback to tear one another from the saddle; three days and three nights, and neither could Sarıbay shake Seytek, nor could Seytek move Sarıbay from his place.

Whoever watched would have marveled: the great ogre's son, the mountain-bodied strongman, could not overcome a child. But the old men standing at the edge of the field saw something else. An aged hunter of Kırgıl's line, narrowing his eyes, murmured through his tears:

— Look — at the boy's right hand there is an emptiness, and in that emptiness there is a shadow. A white-bearded one holds him by the hem, pulling him back the instant the lance would strike. Beside him are two more; one dark and swarthy, tiger-eyed, one broad-shouldered, moon-faced. Behind him forty dim figures stand in ranks.

Some called this Kıdır, the wandering saint Hızır in his beggar's guise; some said it was the spirit of Manas — Almambet and Çubak, with the forty companions, riding beside his grandson. An unseen army was fighting at the side of a visible child. Sarıbay sensed it too. Each time his lance went astray, each time his axe cut only air, a worm of dread burrowed into him. This thing before him was not flesh, not bone; it was an entire homeland, its dead and its living together. Seven times he attacked, and seven times his hand came away empty. At last he hauled on Tookızıl's rein and drew back, drenched in sweat, drenched in blood, and foaming with rage he shouted:

— Boy! There is a secret in you that I do not know. Grant me seven days' respite. At the end of seven days, either your head hangs at my saddle, or my head sits upon your lance!

Seytek was gasping for breath; his arms had turned to lead, and the blood seeping from his thigh had soaked the stirrup. But his voice did not tremble:

— A respite is a man's word, and I give it. In seven days be on this field. If you do not come, I will come after you; though you burrow into the depths of the earth, I will find you there.

When the field emptied, Seytek returned to the ordo; and the moment he returned, his knees gave way, and he let his body, aching in forty places, sink onto the felts. Ayçürök bound her son's wounds with her own hands; she cleansed them with scalding kımız, pounded mountain herbs and pressed them on, anointed them with yellow butter. And as she bound them she did not weep; a swan-born mother does not weep — only her lips move, and she prays. Every night of those seven she sat at her son's head and kept watch over his sleep; and gazing at the sleeping face she saw now Semetey, now Manas, and now this thirteen-year-old sapling.

Sarıbay turned and went, and pitched his tent at the mouth of the black gorge. For six days he lay in the sleep of the alps — such a sleep that his breath swelled and sank the felt of the tent like a sail. Tookızıl was loosed, grazed across forty fathoms of pasture, and rested. On the night of the sixth day Sarıbay awoke; and as he woke, the venom within him boiled up anew — his wounds had scabbed over not with crust but with hatred. At the dawn of the seventh day he girded on his armor and set his mind to war. And the watchmen's drum on the heights boomed out, crying to the whole land that the maddened warrior was returning to the field of single combat.

At that drumbeat, the heart of Talas rose into its throat. For Seytek's wounds had not yet healed; his wrist could hold a lance, true, but the gash in his shoulder bled afresh at every movement. The young hero gathered the people and stood before the ordo, and he did not hide his trouble; a true man does not hide his trouble, he said:

— O homeland of Manas! I will not lie: my arm is weary, my wound is raw. I will ride out to the field again — let none say he fled from death; but I fear that if I ride out today I leave my homeland an orphan. If there is one among you whose heart beats stronger than mine, the field is his. If not, bring my horse.

The crowd fell silent. The strongmen looked at the ground before them; famous marksmen tugged at their beards. Sarıbay's name had settled on every chest like a boulder. Then a stirring passed through the back of the crowd, the ranks parted, and a rider came forward at whose sight every tongue was struck dumb: upon a dark bay courser named Celcetpes sat a girl. This was Kuyalı, daughter of Kayıpçal; her shoulders broader than a man's, her waist slender as a birch, her braids thick as whips. Since her childhood her name had been heard far and wide: they said she had strangled a bear in the mountains, thrown grown men in wrestling, received the blessing of the saints. She rode her horse up before Seytek, did not bow, and spoke bolt upright:

— Son of the khan, my heart is strong — not because I am better than you, but because your wound is in your shoulder and not in your heart. Give the field to me. Either I lay that swine-herd's chief in the dust, or my blood mingles with yours; either one is a feast to me.

A murmur ran through the crowd; to some it was a thing that could not be — how should a woman stand against an ogre's son? But white-bearded Bakay, old Bakay whose beard had whitened like a swan's breast, came forward leaning on his staff, looked deep into Kuyalı's eyes, and nodded:

— There is light on this girl's brow. The lioness too is a lion. In the homeland of Manas, whoever is valiant takes the field; valor lies not in the beard but in the heart.

Then Seytek made his decision. He sent men to the ordo and had brought forth a trust wrapped in forty layers of felt, untouched by any hand for forty years. The wrappings were unwound; from within came Karasaat, the enchanted lance inherited from Manas. The lame master Bölökbay had forged it long ago; he had mixed serpent's venom into its steel, tempered it in the waters of a black spring, worked it three days and three nights without leaving the forge. The wound it dealt would not heal; the armor it pierced would never close again. Seytek lifted the lance in both hands and held it out to Kuyalı:

— My grandfather's arm gripped this lance; my grandfather's spirit has soaked into this iron. Take it — let it be my gift to you. On its point rides the vengeance of my forefathers; in its shaft rests the hope of my homeland. May your road be open and your wrist be stone, my lioness.

Kuyalı took the lance; and in the taking, Celcetpes reared once, as if even the horse knew the weight of the burden it carried.

When she reached the field, Sarıbay laughed first; he laughed so that his laughter struck the valley walls and came back again.

— Have the Kirghiz run out of men, that they throw a bitch before me? Turn and go, long-hair; to kill you is shame to me and pity for you!

Kuyalı did not answer. Karasaat answered: at the first onset it passed through the nine hides of Sarıbay's shield like paper, tore away the shoulder-strap of the black armor, and sank its tooth into his flesh. That day, for the first time, the ogre's son saw his own blood; and that day, for the first time, his laughter ceased. What followed was doomsday. By day they fought, by night they breathed their horses; the next day they fought again. Tookızıl and Celcetpes bit at each other's necks and gouged the earth with their hooves. Sarıbay bore down like a mountain; Kuyalı slid away like a flood, swerved, and wheeled again and again to strike. Every evening when the girl returned to the camp, blood poured from inside her armor; every dawn she girded it on anew. One evening Seytek came to her as her bandages were being bound, and wiped the sweat from her brow:

— There is no shame in saying enough, my lioness. I will take back the field; my wound has healed.

Kuyalı laughed; her laugh was weary but her eyes were embers:

— Son of the khan, I never said enough while wrestling a bear in the mountains — shall I say it to a swine? Karasaat has tasted blood once; enchanted iron does not leave in the dust the blood it has tasted. You look to your homeland; the field is mine.

By the third day, by the fourth, the swine began to tire, his heavy body becoming a burden to his own hatred. Kuyalı saw it; she was a hunter's daughter, and she knew when the quarry's breath grows short.

In the late afternoon of the fifth day Sarıbay attacked with his last strength and raised his axe; the instant he raised it, his armpit lay open, and in that one breath's gap she had waited for, Kuyalı drove Karasaat home with her whole body, with the fury of her whole lineage. The enchanted iron parted the ribs, plunged into the liver, and showed its head through his back. Sarıbay's scream shook the snows of Ala-Too. And then a thing was seen that had never been seen: Kuyalı rose in her stirrups, gripped the shaft of the lance, and lifted the mountain-bodied ogre's son into the air upon the point of the iron lodged in his liver, as one lifts a feed-bag. For a moment she held him so; the sky saw it, the earth saw it, two armies saw it. Then she shook him off and dashed him to the ground. The dust settled, and Sarıbay never stirred again.

Meanwhile the ninety heathen champions who had trailed at Sarıbay's back, seeing their chief's head fall, made to flee; but the warriors of Talas had long since cut off their roads. Those who fled were hunted down; those who resisted were cut to pieces. They hewed Sarıbay's black carcass apart, heaped it on a pyre of wood, and set it aflame; the fire burned three days, the ash was scattered to the sky, the wind took that ash and strewed it across deserts no one knows. So that he might never rise again; so that his shadow might never fall upon the homeland.

The land breathed free; how could it not? For months the watchmen on the heights had gone without sleep, mothers had hidden their children in the mountain hollows, the flocks had been loosed to pasture in fear. Now that black cloud had scattered; the fled returned, the hidden came forth, camp was rejoined to camp. The stars themselves envied the count of fires kindled in Talas that night. Kımız went round bowl after bowl, sheep turned on the spits, the bards took up the komuz. They seated Kuyalı upon white felt and raised her high; in a single day her name rang out to the four corners of the steppe: the lioness, they called her, the mistress of Karasaat, they called her. Seytek seated her at his right hand; two young ones — one who had spilled ogre's blood, one the blood of khans — sat side by side at the fire, and the hearts of the people swelled as they watched.

But at the rim of the festivity, where the light of the fires ended, old Bakay stood alone. His beard, whitened like a swan, had sunk to his breast; his eyes were on the flames, but his gaze was far, far away. His lips were moving; had anyone listened, they would have heard a prayer — not a prayer of joy, but a prayer of farewell. The door of an age was closing, and only this old man could hear its creak.

✦ ✦ ✦

On the seventh day of the feast, the word fell to Bakay. The people formed a ring, the fire was set at the center, and the old man rose to his feet. There was no one who did not know him: the saintly elder who made the withered green again, who brought the open-palmed to their heart's desire; the father of Manas's counsel, the guide of Semetey's road, the plane tree of two generations. He opened his hands to the sky; and the moment he opened them, the wind stilled, and the flame of the fire rose straight and tall.

— I take refuge in the oneness of the Creator, he said. Seytek, light of my eye, blood of Manas! Kuyalı, shield of the homeland, lioness of lions! My prayer is for you both — may it stand unshaken until the day of judgment. May your enemy's road be narrow, and your friend's table wide. May the tulpar you mount never stumble, may the iron you gird never break. May the spirit of Manas walk before you, the forty çilten at your right hand, Kıdır at your left, and may the saint Bahâeddin guard your back. You, Seytek — be a just khan who splits the black hair down its middle; take not the curse of the weak, bow not before the strong. If you are a withered ear of grain, grow green; if you are stranded on the road, reach your journey's end. Say amen, my children!

From thousands of mouths the amen filled Talas, struck against Keñ-Kol, and came back. The women were weeping; had you asked them why they wept, they could not have said. Their hearts knew.

For after the prayer, the treachery of this mortal world showed its face. As that winter drew to its close, Bakay was first to set out upon the road; he did not sicken, he did not fall — he simply asked one morning for his white-grey horse, turned his face toward the qibla, said, "They are calling me to the place from which none return, my children," and closed his eyes. After him, when the snows melted and Talas swelled, Külçoro rendered up his trust; Külçoro whose shoulder blade had been gouged, who had endured slavery and

become a lion once more — Semetey's right arm, Seytek's father of the road — saw his lord in a dream one night, said, "They are waiting for me," and did not live to see the morning. And before summer came, the valiant mother Kanıkey — Kanıkey who had seen dark days and shown bright ones — took her son's son's son into her arms, breathed in his scent, said, "My eyes look back no longer," turned her face to the wall, and never turned again.

Thus the people were parted, one by one, from the grey-maned lions of Ala-Too. The mourning was great; before the grey yurts white-scarved mothers sobbed, and warriors buried their faces in their horses' manes and wept. At three graves the fortieth-day rites were held three times; over three dead the bards sang three lifetimes from their beginnings. Whenever Kanıkey was remembered, the old days came alive on every tongue: how on the night of Abıke and Köböş's treachery she had thrust the swaddled Semetey into her bosom and fled from Talas to Buhara; how she had made stone her pillow and snow her blanket; how she had come to the threshold of her father Temirkan and raised her son unknowing of his lineage. The old kinship of Manas and Akun Khan was recalled; how the two khans, before their children were even born, had bound a cradle-pledge with Koşoy and Bakay as witnesses, saying, "If yours be a girl, then to my son" — those days were put into words again. Ayçürök's name passed among them; the fame of the peri maiden who had donned the white swan's form and gone seeking her beloved, the legendary memorial feast of Kökötöy, the great feast Bokmurun had ordered, and the old quarrels Konurbay had stirred over that beauty — all of it moved again through the mouths of the elders like a testament. One aged bard, striking the strings of his komuz, lamented Kanıkey thus: "She who knew the road in black night, who knew the trail through forty patches; who pillowed her head on stone and bedded down in snow, who clenched her life in her teeth for her son's sake; who swallowed shame at Temirkan's threshold and would not bow her head; chief among brides, mother of warriors, white-faced Kanıkey — when you went, the waters of Talas ran lower by one measure." Among the listeners not one was left unweeping; even the warriors let their tears run into their beards and were not ashamed to leave them unwiped. As the dead were remembered they came alive; and as they came alive, the hearts of the living burned and hardened both at once.

At the end of the fortieth day, a cry rose from the edge of the mourning; first from one mouth, then from a hundred:

— When the camel bull dies, the calf remains; when the grey wolf dies, Seytek remains!

That day Seytek came out before his people. He untied the black sash of mourning and bound on the white, and his voice filled the valley:

— O homeland of Manas! Our forefathers have gone; their tracks remain, and we stand upon those tracks. I swear this oath: I will unite the divided, I will gather the scattered. If the fire of a single Kirghiz camp goes out, that fire shall be rekindled from my own hearth. If ever I fatten on the back of the weak, may my own bread stop against my eyes. Be one; the homeland that is not one is devoured not by the wolf, but by its own shadow.

Upon this the Kirghiz people gathered; from Çüy, from Keñ-Kol, from the far banks of the Sır-Derya, from the hollows beyond Ala-Too they came, camp by camp, tribe by tribe. The white-beards put their heads together, and for three days and three nights they took counsel; but the end of the counsel was known from its beginning, for the hearts had long since decided: Seytek would be raised khan. They seated him on white felt and lifted him nine times into the air, set him upon the golden throne, and placed in his hand the two reins and the single halter; "the rein of the homeland is yours," they said, "and its judgment is yours." Ninety white-grey mares were sacrificed, their blood given to the earth, their prayer to the sky. The cauldrons were set, the meat heaped mountain-high, and the covenants bound: the khan swore justice to his people, the people swore faith to their khan; may the hearth of the oath-breaker go dark, they said — thus were the undying covenants bound.

At the feast's end the eldest of the elders took Seytek into their midst. One of them, an old man past his hundredth year, laid his hand on the young khan's shoulder:

— Khan, my son, may your throne be blessed; but know that a throne is no featherbed — it is a seat of thorns. Enemies stand on your four sides: in the east the Kitay lies in ambush, and Beecin's hatred has no end; the Kalmuk whets his teeth at the border; the Solon and the Şibe watch for their moment. Your forefathers took this homeland with blood; you must hold it with sweat. Take the burden of the homeland upon your shoulder; it is heavy, but upon the back of him who will not carry it, no sun ever rises.

Seytek bowed and pressed the old man's hand to his forehead:

— The burden upon my shoulder, the oath upon my neck, he said. I will carry it.

And it was as if the sky heard that word; that year abundance rained upon Talas and Keñ-Kol. The grass grew not knee-high but stirrup-high; the mares foaled twins, and those

who milked the ewes grew weary before the milk ran dry. The hunter did not return empty; the grain filled out without a husk. The old ones said, "This is the very haunch of the earth: its game before it, its herds behind it, its water honey, its stone a pillow." So opened the age of the just khan: the black hair was split down the middle, the right of the weak was taken back from the hand of the strong, the road of the road-cutter was cut. The smoke of the grey yurts rose straight; and smoke that rises straight is the banner of a heart at peace. Every morning before first light Seytek would rise and hear the plaintiffs before the ordo, picking out the truth from forty words at a single glance. In the evenings he would seat the old men at his table and have them tell of his forefathers' days, and he would close his eyes as he listened; for he knew: the khan who does not listen to his past cannot see his future. Kuyalı became the shield of the homeland; it was she who rode the borderlands, she who brought the lawless wanderer back to the road. When her name was heard, raider bands changed their course, saying, "In that land there is a lioness."

✦ ✦ ✦

In one of those years of plenty, Akcoltoy, one of Seytek's companions, had ridden south to carry word to the frontier camps. Thinking to shorten his homeward road, he turned aside into the waterless steppe; and no sooner had he turned than calamity met him. In that sea of sand the wells had dried and the grasses were scorched. Three days he rode and found no water; on the fourth day the tulpar beneath him, its tongue lolling a span from its mouth, sank to its knees and did not rise again. Akcoltoy took his horse's head upon his knee and wept; a true man weeps for his horse, and there is no shame in it. Then he shouldered his saddle and set out on foot. The sun came down from its height like a lance, roasting the floor of sand. His eyes darkened, his knees gave way; and as he fell upon his face, a single word spilled from his lips:

— Forefathers... the road...

When he opened his eyes he lay in a shadow, and the owner of the shadow — an old man in white raiment, his face full of light, a white felt cap upon his head and a staff in his hand — was holding out to him a bowl of water. Whence had he come; whence, in the heart of the desert, had water come? His tongue could not frame the question. He drank; and as he drank, life ran back into his veins. Behind the old man stood two coursers — such horses that whoever saw them could never look at a common herd again: their manes

longer than silk, their eyes like embers, their bearing like mountains. One was dun-coated, one with a foal's soft coat.

— Fear not, brave one, said the old man; his voice was like a cool spring. To reach those stranded on the road — that is our work. These two coursers are of peri stock; their dam foaled beyond Mount Kaf, and the wind itself has combed their manes. Kulunsur is yours — mount, and let him take wing. And Kulansur I entrust to your khan, to Seytek; he is of the line and of the secret of his own Kulansur — from this day forth, the ground he treads shall not slip, the road he takes shall not stray.

Only then was Akcoltoy's tongue loosed:

— Who are you, father? Let me know your name, that I may pray for you.

The old man laughed; and when he laughed, a coolness passed over the desert.

— My name is known to those stranded on the road, he said. I have one more trust for you. Take this letter, tuck it into your breast, and carry it to your khan. It comes from beyond Mount Kaf, from the golden city; its writer is a girl who has had her destiny written. And take this bundle: within it is a ring, a kaftan no arrow can pierce, and a Zülfikar; whoever sent them, sent them with a whole heart. May your road be open, brave one. Say to your khan: fortune is coming to his very feet — let him know how to receive it.

Akcoltoy first opened the bundle and looked; had he not looked, his heart could not have borne it. The ring appeared and vanished between his fingers, its stone like a star at midnight. The kaftan was light in the hand and heavy on the eye; plainly the hand that wove it was no human hand. And the Zülfikar: its sheath black, its hilt white, and when he drew it, a light ran across its face like water; Akcoltoy could not look long, and slid it back into its sheath, for to gaze long upon such iron weighs heavy on a mortal man. Akcoltoy knelt and kissed the earth; when he raised his head, the old man was gone. No track of him in the sand, no shadow. Only the two coursers stood there, and in the distance, where all had been bone-dry a moment before, a spring was welling up. Then Akcoltoy understood from whose hand he had drunk; this was Kıdır, companion of the stranded, the Saintly Elder. Once more he bowed to the earth, then mounted Kulunsur; at the first stride the horse became a bird, and the steppe flowed away beneath its feet like felt being rolled.

The writer of the letter was Akbermet, daughter of the khan of the golden city beyond Mount Kaf; of peri lineage, a girl whose beauty made the sun say, "You stay down — let me not rise while she does." One night she had seen in a dream an old man in white raiment;

the old man had taken her hand and laid it in the hand of the young khan of a distant land, saying, "I have sealed your marriage; I have bound your destiny." When she woke, her heart was no longer her own; from that day the golden throne was thorns to her, the treasury gravel, the palace of eighty rooms a narrow cell. She asked, she inquired; from caravans, from birds, from the wind she gathered word: the hero of her dream was Seytek, khan of Talas, blood of Manas, son of Semetey. The girl left her father's throne and her mother's treasury behind her; taking her thousand champions, she set out upon the roads. But in the black gorge of the Kaf road a dragon rose before them; its mouth a cavern, its breath fire. The thousand champions rained down their swords, and the thousand champions became the dragon's food in that gorge; Akbermet with her eighty maidens barely escaped with her life — and she swore an oath, and did not turn back. "If I die, let me die on his road," she said, and sent her letter, her ring, her arrow-proof kaftan, and the Zülfikar of her forefathers to her beloved by the hand of Hızır.

When Akcoltoy reached Talas he slid from his horse like the wind before the ordo and offered the letter to his khan with both hands. Seytek read; and as he read, his face went now pale, now crimson. At the letter's end stood these words: "In my dream, Hızır sealed our marriage; you do not know it, but I know it. I have left my throne; I am on the roads. In Keñ-Özön I have pitched my pavilion with its swing, and my eyes are on the road. If you are a man, come; if you do not come, there is no door left to me in this world but death."

When the land heard this news, it rose up in festival. The old ones looked at one another and laughed:

— Seytek's fortune outshines even his father's! Semetey went all the way to Ürgenç for Ayçürök, chasing the white swan; this time the peri beauty comes on her own feet!

Seytek first remembered his forefathers. To the spirit of Manas he sacrificed a white-grey mare, giving its blood to the earth and its savor to the sky; he went to the graves of Bakay, of Kanıkey, of Külçoro, and asked their blessing one by one. Then the preparations for the journey began. The white-pommeled saddle inherited from Almambet was brought out of its forty-year chest, its silver polished, and set upon Kulansur; the horse, as if knowing the trust upon its back, neighed once, long and deep. The arrow-proof kaftan was donned, the Zülfikar girded on, Akbermet's ring slipped onto the little finger. Kuyalı and the warriors made ready for the road; the mothers scattered white milk, prayers were bound upon them, and the procession set out toward Keñ-Özön.

The road was long; mountains were crossed, waters forded, three times they camped and three times they broke camp. Kulansur went in the lead, and Hızır's word did not prove empty: on the steep pass the stone he trod did not shift, in the misted hollow he did not lose the way; even at night, when no star showed, he would turn his head to one side, the procession would march that way, and when morning came, that way proved the true road. Kuyalı rode at Seytek's right hand upon Celcetpes, now and then glancing sidelong at her young khan and smiling; she saw the sweet turmoil in her khan's heart, but pretended not to see; such is the courtesy of the companion of the road. When they reached the border of Keñ-Özön, Akcoltoy drew yet another trust from his breast: this was the spyglass left from Manas, an enchanted eye that brought what it beheld from seven days' distance to one's very side. He climbed a hill, set the glass to his eye, and swept the plains. And he saw: in a green hollow, white pavilions pitched, and before the greatest of them, at its center, a swing hung on silver chains; and on the swing, amid eighty maidens, a girl swaying — such a girl that even the enchanted eye of the glass could not gaze long upon that face. Akcoltoy lowered the glass and turned to his khan:

— I have found her, my khan. Her pavilion stands in that hollow, her swing is hung, and her eyes are on the road.

In those same hours Akbermet, in her pavilion, her head laid upon the knee of her confidante Külayım, was telling the dream she had seen in the night:

— In my dream the moon rose, Külayım, a silver moon; it glided and glided and came and slipped into my right bosom. After it the sun rose, a golden sun; and it slipped into my left bosom. The two met in my bosom, and my world was drowned in light. I woke, and my heart is fluttering like a bird. Is it for good, or for ill?

Külayım laughed and stroked the girl's hair:

— It is for good, my moon-faced one, for the greatest good. The moon is a valiant man; he who enters your bosom is the khan written in your destiny. The sun is sovereign fortune, the greatness in your star. The woman who takes moon and sun into her bosom both reaches her beloved and sees her line turn toward the sun. Wait; what you wait for is nearer than you think.

The words had scarcely left her mouth when a great booming broke out beyond. It was the drum of the champions on watch upon the hill; it boomed and boomed, its voice filling the hollow. The eighty maidens sprang up as one. The watch-girl flew into the pavilion and cried out breathlessly:

— Good tidings, my lady, good tidings! A procession has appeared on the horizon; at its head a dun tulpar, and upon it a lion in a white kaftan with a grey-blue mane. His bearing is a khan's bearing, and his gaze is turned toward the moon-faced one!

Akbermet came down from the swing; her knees were trembling, her heart would not stay within her breast. She seized Külayım's hand:

— Your dream has come true, Külayım. The moon has come to the door. Now tell me: the eye that has watched the road for forty days — how shall it endure one breath more?

Two destinies — between them a hollow, a drumbeat, the pounding of a heart — stood upon the threshold of their meeting. But a destiny that rises from beyond Kaf does not come alone; the golden city the peri maiden had left behind also watched the road, and in the sheath of the Zülfikar there slept a glad tiding that no one yet knew.

CHAPTER 42

The Peri Brides and the Glad Tidings of Zulpukor

— ❖ —

That year spring came down upon Keñ-Özön like a bride. The snows had withdrawn from the passes, in the valley's bosom the grasses had swelled knee-high, and the waters had hung silver anklets upon the stones. Two caravans, descending from either side, mingled in the middle of the plain like the meeting of two rivers; neighing herds nosed one another, camels knelt, felt doors were thrown open. There, in the light of day, tiger-hearted Seytek looked his fill for the first time upon the face of peri-born Akbermet; and there Akcoltoy, master of counsel, standing before Külayım, understood that his tongue was tied. What men call longing was a bridge of horsehair strung between two mountains; that day both couples crossed that bridge, and no one looked back into the abyss.

Külayım, seated at the place of honor in the grey yurt while the firelight played upon her face, began to speak. Her voice was clear as if washed in river gravel.

— Shall I tell you a secret, Akcoltoy, she said. We did not come to you of our own devising. One night in a dream I saw a saint with a white turban and a white beard; his staff was a pillar from earth to sky. He said to me: They call my name Kızır, and I reach the mortal in his hour of need. Two peri maidens from beyond Kaf are written to two heroes of Ala-Too; Akbermet to Seytek, and you to Coltoy. I have given them twin foals, Kulansur and Kulunsur; each is the other's shadow, and both are tulpars got by the wind. Go, follow after your portion. So I too rose, left throne and crown behind me, carried the desert on my back, and came.

Akcoltoy bowed his head; the weariness of the road, the thirst of the desert, the grief of his dead horse, that scorching day when Hızır had appeared — all passed one by one before his eyes.

— I too have endured no little, Külayım, he said. In the waterless steppe my tongue stuck to my palate; I took my tulpar's head upon my knee and wept. That saint appeared to me also, put two reins into my hand, and laid a letter in my breast. Since that day my heart has wheeled in the air like a falcon seeking its master. Now it has found its branch to light upon. You are witness, the sky is witness, the earth is witness: if ever I bring a rival wife over you, may the horse Kızır gave me throw me from its back, may the kımız I drink turn to poison in me. Whoever breaks this oath, may he stand black-faced before the spirit of Manas.

Külayım smiled; peri maidens have little use for many words — they understand the true word.

The next day, in the middle of Keñ-Özön, two white ordas with golden poles were raised; the crowns of the poles blazed in the sun like kindled torches. The white-beards came forward and the marriages were sealed according to rite; two rings were dropped into a bowl of water, prayers were bound, witnesses raised their hands. Then such a wedding was made that Keñ-Özön could no longer hear its own rushing. Eighty brides carried kımız, eighty maidens portioned the meat; the cauldrons boiled on nine hearths and did not rest for nine days and nine nights. Horse races were run, strongmen locked in wrestling; when night fell the fires were kindled, and the old days poured from the strings of the komuz. An aged manasçı loosed his voice into the night and took up the tale from Manas's birth in the Altay; the listeners wept, laughed, swore oaths. The two brides took the arms of the two heroes; the stars that night sank low, and lower still, over the steppe.

When the wedding was done the camp was struck, the loads were bound, and the way turned toward Talas. The camels were strung out file upon file, the herds driven ahead; in Akbermet's dowry there were felts woven by peri craftsmen, cloths come from the unseen world, and chest upon chest of silver ingots. At every halt along the road the people came out to meet them; white-haired mothers circled salt about the brides' heads, and children trampled one another to touch the tulpars' manes.

When they reached Talas, the early autumn sun stood over the homeland of Manas. The news had long since arrived; from the four corners of Ala-Too the white-capped Kirghiz flowed and kept flowing. The mouth of Keñ-Kol turned into a white city of pitched grey yurts. The elders came forward and took the word; one recalled how Manas had roared at the Great Campaign, one recalled Semetey's return from Buhara, one recalled how Seytek, still in the cradle, had been saved from death. Then the white felt was brought, and four white-beards took it by its four corners; they seated Seytek upon it and lifted him three times to the sky, lowered him three times, and three times bore him around the encampment.

— Blood of Manas, soul of Semetey, khan of the Kirghiz! the crowd thundered. White-grey mares were sacrificed, their blood given to the soil, their prayer to the sky. The golden throne was set at the place of honor in the ordo, and Seytek sat upon it; the two reins and the single halter were delivered once more into the hand of Manas's line.

From that day the land leavened like yogurt. The camps multiplied, the flocks covered the hills, the kımız could not be exhausted by the milking. The estranged were reconciled, the poor received their share, no hand was left wanting. Seytek carried out the law as justly as one splits a black hair down its middle; Akcoltoy was the mind at his right hand, Kuyalı the heart at his left. The caravan men crossing the steppe asked one another: A khan has arisen in Talas, they say he is Manas's grandson — is it true? It was true. And the true word is swift of foot; good news mounts a horse and rides, and one day it reaches even the ill-wishing ear.

✦ ✦ ✦

That ill-wishing ear was in Beecin.

Konurbay had long been dead; his son Baykoñur had girded on his father's hatred together with his father's throne, but at forty-nine, without reaching his desire, he had closed his eyes. His son succeeded him: great Kite. On the day he sat upon the Kakan's throne, the gates of the forty-gated palace stood open forty days; but Kite's heart did not match the festivity outside. The blows his grandfather had taken at Talas, the vengeance that had lodged undigested in his father's craw — these had come down to him as inheritance; and what men call inheritance is not gold alone: to some lines, hatred is bequeathed.

One day caravan men were brought before him; men laden with silk, and long of tongue.

— What news from the west? asked Kite.

— In the west, our khan, there is Talas, they said. In Talas there is a khan; they call him Seytek, grandson of Manas. He has taken a peri maiden to wife and sat upon a golden throne; his herds are past counting, his land a rose garden. The Kirghiz have returned to their old strength — and overflowed it.

The cup in Kite's hand cracked. The name of Manas was still a wound's scab in that palace; lift it, and blood seeped from beneath.

— That line struck down my grandfather's grandfather, he said through his teeth. My father went to his grave without disgorging that vengeance. I will disgorge it.

He sent men and had Çoñbilgiç, son of Kococaş, brought before him. Çoñbilgiç was a sorcerer of eighty years; his brows hung over his eyes like tents, his mind was deeper than forty books, his heart colder than forty winters. He milked the cloud, wove the mist, bridled the wind and rode it. But he also knew the Kirghiz.

— My khan, he said, your command is upon my head; yet I have one word. The Kirghiz, I tell you, are no easy morsel. Esenkan tried, Alööke tried, your forefather Konurbay gave his life to it; from that stony land no one has returned sated. Manas dies, Semetey is born; Semetey vanishes into mystery, Seytek arises. That line is like a branch that grows again wherever it is cut.

— A branch, said Kite, is cut with an axe. You who bind the very air and read the earth — take a hundred champions and go. Tear out his herds, break his warriors, and bring me that branch by its root.

A khan's command bends the neck; Çoñbilgiç set aside his forty years of wisdom and bowed his eighty-year-old neck. The hundred choicest champions of Beecin took up arms; at their head, upon the grey-blue horse Kerik, his drum lashed behind his saddle, the old sorcerer, and they took the road west. Çoñbilgiç chanted to the sky and blew; he bound the air with mist and wrapped the hundred riders behind him in a quilt of cloud. Thus they crossed Boz-Talaa; no one saw them. Then the Plain of Torment rose before them; the place named torment had not taken its name in vain. Winds blew that froze to ice, blizzards wiped out the roads; six champions were left on that plain, even their names freezing beneath the snows. Ninety-four men, slinking like famished wolves, reached the skirts of Ala-Too, and the sorcerer crept in among the rocks and lay down to watch.

In those same hours, in Talas, Seytek had sent his peri-given courser Kulunsur to be tethered apart on the high pasture to fatten, had hung his weapons at the head of the place of honor, and had sunk into a honeyed peace in Akbermet's orda. What men call heedlessness steals into a hero's bosom just so: while the enemy is at the door, the curtain is of silk.

One night Akbermet started from her dream with a scream. Her brow was damp, her eyes wide; Seytek sat up and took her hand.

— What did you see, Bermet?

— May it be for good, said Akbermet, her voice trembling. In the sky the full moon and the sun stood side by side; both poured their light upon our land. Then I saw a tiger with a collar; its collar was of gold, and it lay before the ordo, and no one feared it. Beside it hung two steel swords, both newly whetted, both dancing in the daylight. Then from the east a dragon broke loose; it came spewing black smoke from its mouth, fell upon one of the swords, and broke it at the middle. I cried out, and I woke.

Before morning came, Akcoltoy was summoned; the reading of dreams was his art, and his mind untangled forty knots at a single pull. He listened, stroked his beard, and his face now brightened, now darkened.

— Your dream is no dream, Bermet — it is a mirror, he said. The full moon and the sun are the fortune of you and Külayım; you have both become light to this land. The collared tiger is Seytek: the tiger's heart has put on the collar of the law and become khan; his khanship will be made firm, and none shall shake it. Of the two steel swords, one is Seytek himself; the other, O Bermet, is being whetted in your womb. You will have a son; a lion-hearted son whose name will walk the earth. But the dragon that breaks loose from the

east is the calamity that will break loose from China; Beecin's hatred does not sleep — rake over its ashes and you will find live coals. The breaking of the sword is a heavy omen; whet your weapons without delay, send out watchmen, and do not lie heedless.

The interpretation had not yet finished in his mouth when hoofbeats broke out beyond. The messenger Kadike, his horse's mouth all foam, flung himself down before the ordo.

— My khan! Beyond the border a hundred riders in foreign garb have been seen! They are like neither envoys nor caravan; they come and go within a mist, and their tracks vanish!

Before the word could pass from mouth to ear, a booming came from afar; whether earth or sky was groaning, none could tell. Çoñbilgiç had brought out his drum of elephant hide and struck the beater. The voice of that drum was the voice of death; the gall of any beast that heard it shook as with fever. In an instant Seytek's herds that covered the hills went mad; mares trampled their foals, stallions fell upon one another, and the whole herd tore loose from its roots like a black flood. The ninety-four champions ringed it, drove it before them, and pressed it toward Suusamır. The herdsmen resisted; those who resisted were cut down. Only Erebay, wounded in seven places, dragged himself out from among the dead, clutched a stallion's mane, and barely carried his life to Talas.

— The herds are gone, my khan, he said, covered in blood. My comrades are slain. An old man with a drum, and behind him champions in the armor of Beecin... They are driving them toward Suusamır.

The ordo boiled over in an instant. His grandfather's fire flashed into Seytek's eyes; Akbermet, without a word, went inside and drew from the deepest of the chests a coat of mail. It was armor cast by peri craftsmen, at forges whose bellows beat the fire with wind; its rings were fine as fish scales — it let no arrow through, and made the sword slide away.

— I have kept this for you, she said. And this also: my father's sword, Aç Elmas — Hungry Diamond. Hungry they call it, for it has never been seen sated. Take it, gird it on; but do not gird it on heedlessly. Do not forget the dragon of my dream.

Seytek donned the mail, belted on Aç Elmas, and Kulunsur was brought down from the heights; the tulpar caught the scent of war and pawed the earth. Yet Akcoltoy had moved before them all; he drank a bowl of kımız from Külayım's hand and leapt onto Kulansur.

— You gather the army and come after me, he said to Seytek. I will fall upon their trail before it cools; the herd travels slow, and I travel like the wind.

And alone, he set out after the ninety-four champions.

On the Suusamır road he caught their dust. Behind the herd he saw the old man riding the grey-blue Kerik, and he loosed his voice across the steppe:

— Halt — halt before your white beard falls to the black earth! What belongs to the Kirghiz stays with the Kirghiz; leave it, or turn back, or die!

Çoñbilgiç turned; his eighty-year-old eyes weighed the young warrior.

— Have you come alone, he said, against all great Beecin? Your forefathers were wise; they came with an army.

— My forefathers were wise, said Coltoy; they used to say a thief needs no army.

They kept to the custom; in single combat the turn is a right, and the sorcerer struck first. His lance flashed like lightning on Coltoy's shield; the shield split, the warrior reeled, but did not fall. The turn came to Coltoy; he struck, fire burst from the old man's armor, the old man swayed once in his saddle, but did not fall. Again, and again; the lances shattered like reeds, they seized their axes, the hafts of the axes came away in their hands. Six days and six nights they fought; by day the sun stood witness, by night the stars. The horses sank to their knees in the earth, and the sweat of the two bodies ran off in rivers. On the morning of the seventh day the sorcerer, whose cunning was sharper than his sword, pulled his rein as if in flight; Kerik glided away toward the heights. Coltoy, his blood boiling, gave chase — and when he came out of a narrow defile, he saw around him the ring of the ninety-four champions. The trap had closed its mouth.

Coltoy set his back against a hill. Arrows rained; some the shield caught, some the armor, some his flesh caught. Blood seeped from Kulansur's croup; it seeped from the warrior's shoulder, from his hip, from his arm. He endured a day, he endured a night; on the second day, when the sun stood straight overhead, his lips were cracked and his sword arm had grown heavy. Külayım's face came before his eyes; the oath he had sworn came, and the water Kızır had held out to him in the desert came.

— O You in the sky, he said, You brought me here; do not leave me here.

He was not left. On the horizon there first appeared a dust, then out of the dust broke a neighing; it was the neighing of Kulunsur, and Kulansur raised his wounded head and answered. Seytek was coming — but he was not coming alone. Afterward the champions

swore oaths as they told it: at the young khan's two sides rode forty more horsemen, their faces beyond discerning, their horses' feet not touching the ground; and at the very front a white-turbaned saint opened the way with his staff. The forty çilten and Hızır İlyas had come out of the unseen to ride companion to Manas's grandson.

The ring broke where he split it, and spilled apart with screaming. Kaysar, the most famed strongman of Beecin — his neck a bull's neck, his voice a mountain's voice — barred Seytek's way:

— My grandfather knew your grandfather; now let me know you!

— Know me, said Seytek, and swung the sword Oykuma. Kaysar's helm did not hold; his head was cloven in two down to the very chin, and the great body crashed like a felled plane tree. At that sight the knees of the champions turned to water. Seytek leveled the enchanted lance and sought the sorcerer; he found him in the mist, and struck. The lance pierced Çoñbilgiç's armor and drove into his flank; the old man pitched forward over his drum, vomiting blood.

Coltoy meanwhile had loosened his sash; within it were the salves and remedies Külayım had placed there. He pressed them to his wound and bound it with his teeth; what remained in his palm he rubbed on Kulansur's croup. Such is a remedy when it comes from a peri's hand: the warrior straightened, the horse shook itself, and down the hill they came, as two grey wolves come down upon a flock. Seytek broke them from the right, Coltoy from the left; of the ninety-four champions there was about to remain not one foot to flee, when the blood-soaked Çoñbilgiç showed that he had saved his last spell for himself: he tore loose a mist, flung himself down upon grey Kerik's mane, and like the wind of dawn set off alone on the Kakan road. In the eyes of Seytek, watching after him, the tail of the dragon from Akbermet's dream curled away and was gone.

✦ ✦ ✦

Seytek's blood did not cool; he turned Kulunsur's head to the east.

— I will follow him, he said. I will hound him to Beecin itself; at that gate I will demand the reckoning of what their grandfathers did to my grandfathers, of what their fathers did to my fathers. I will bring the Kakan's throne down upon his head!

Akcoltoy, with his wounded arm, seized Kulunsur's rein; he gripped the bit and would not let go.

— Hold, my lion, hold, he said. He who rises in wrath sits down in loss. Hıtay is not the road one man flees down — it is the open mouth of a giant. Around Beecin lies a corral of iron; it has moats a man's height deep; it has walls no arrow can cross; at its gate lie armies tümen upon tümen, and if one is broken, ten thousand mount in its place. Your great forefather Manas — with his forty companions, with a guide who knew the roads like Almambet, with a tulpar like Akkula — went on the Great Campaign, and even he turned back from that gate; and turning back, took his gravest wound there. And you would ride into that corral now, on a weary horse, with a wounded comrade, with an army not yet gathered at your back? If the sorcerer has fled, his terror will reach Beecin before us; that terror will stand sentry on their walls for ten years. Turn back; your herds are saved, your homeland is whole, your vengeance is taken. Valor is not only going forward; it is also knowing where to stand.

Seytek's hand tightened on the rein, then eased. Then he drew a deep breath, and his wrath scattered from his breast out over the steppe.

— Were it not for you, Coltoy, he said, I would be a moth flying into the flame. You say turn back; let us turn back.

The weapons, the armor, the horses of the slain champions were gathered; the herds that had been torn away were rounded up and driven before them. Such a return they made to Talas that the roar of the welcoming people filled Keñ-Kol. The spoils were shared out; a horse fell to the orphan, goods to the poor, a tending hand to the wounded. Erebay's seven wounds were bound, cauldrons were hung over the hearths of the fallen herdsmen, and their names were honored at the feast. The land settled back into plenty; but from that day Seytek passed no night without a watchman, and never again took his weapons down from the head of the place of honor. The dream of the dragon stood at the threshold of the ordo like a sentinel.

In Beecin, meanwhile, when grey Kerik reached the palace gate with its half-dead burden, Çoñbilgiç's beard had matted into felt with blood. The healers swarmed about him; they cauterized the lance wound in his flank and gave him remedies, and for forty days he lay between death and health. On the forty-first day he opened his eyes; Kite stood at his head, his face a black cloud.

— I gave you a hundred champions, said Kite, and you have come back with a drum.

— Did I not tell you, my khan, said the sorcerer, that the Kirghiz are no easy morsel? Yet I have not returned empty either; I whetted my mind there, and I have come back to you with a counsel. This vengeance is the work not of your sword, but of your seed. The khan of Hind, Kergi, has a daughter; Burul they call her; her star is heavy, her breast is blessed. Take her. The son born of her will see what we could not see.

Kite did not depart from the sorcerer's word; he sent matchmakers to the land of Hind, brought Burul to Beecin with white pomp, and seated her beside his throne. When her time came, Burul bore a son; they named him Çınteñir. The child clenched his fist while still in the cradle, and before he reached ten he was throwing champions. By custom he was tested: there was a dark well called the well of Zuu, at whose bottom lay a sixty-headed dragon; whoever aspired to the khanship was lowered there. They let Çınteñir down on a rope; for three days no sound came, and for three days Beecin did not breathe. On the fourth day they drew up the rope; the boy came out — in his eyes a share of the well's darkness, in his palm a scale torn from one of the dragon's sixty heads. He was alive; but the one who came out of the well was other than the one who had gone down. In his eleventh year his father Kite passed away; before Çınteñir had reached his twelfth, he buried his father and sat upon the Kakan's throne. The elders of Beecin looked at one another and were silent: the scourge of the coming generation had entered the world and settled on its throne. But to grieve over that scourge was the work not of that day, but of tomorrow's children; in Talas that winter, another piece of news drowned out all the rest.

✦ ✦ ✦

Akbermet's step grew heavy; the peri maiden was carrying a life for the line of Manas. The ordo surged with joy, and Külayım did not leave the bride's side for a moment. Then the cravings of her condition came upon Bermet; but what she craved, no one had ever heard the like of: she craved the flesh of a tiger. She wanted neither kımız nor kazı; her eye saw neither honey nor cream. She paled, she wilted, and a single word fell from her tongue: tiger.

— The man-child in her womb will be tiger-hearted, said the old mothers; his soul is drawing toward its own form.

Akcoltoy, leaving no room for anyone's word, girded on his weapons.

— The tiger falls to me, he said, and set out for the hidden folds of Ala-Too, for the reed-grown streams.

Three days he roamed and found no track. On the evening of the third day, as the sun turned crimson, he saw a dappled tiger upon a rock; it sat, and it watched him with human eyes. Coltoy drew his bow — and his hand froze in the air; for the tiger spoke, and its voice was the very voice that had given water in the desert:

— Lower your bow, Akcoltoy. You saw me once in the desert, once in a dream; now see me in this form. The flesh Bermet craves is my flesh; but no arrow bites me, and to slay me does not become you. Take this.

The tiger stretched out its paw and dropped a walnut into his palm — a grey walnut, its shell like stone, its scent like incense.

— This walnut is from a tree that grew in the desert of Mediyan, in the place where dragon's venom fell; it is the wisdom of God, who creates the cure out of the poison. Let Bermet eat it; her craving will be stilled, and the man-child in her womb will stay hale. When he is born, name him Kenen — that he may be abundant, that he may be wide, that he may never be cut off: Kenen. And I have one trust more: go down to the stream, and there you will find a foal born of the unseen; no one ever saw its dam, and only the wind knows its sire. Its name is Kertulpar. It is Kenen's horse; it will grow to his measure and come of age to his day. Go now, and may your eyes be bright with the good news.

Coltoy laid his head to the ground; when he raised it, the top of the rock was empty, and only in the grass a great paw print still steamed. He went down to the stream; among the reeds stood a foal, its back red-bay, its eyes like embers, as if it had come into the world to wait for a human being. It came without a halter, drew near, and fell in behind Coltoy.

In Talas, Bermet ate the walnut; in the very hour she ate it, blood returned to her face and light to her eyes. Her craving ceased, her body settled and smiled. Kertulpar was tethered beside Kulunsur and Kulansur, at a place of honor of its own; a tulpar whose rider was not yet born stood growing beneath the stars.

That same night Seytek, at Akbermet's side, fell for the first time in long months into a sleep like stone; and in the deepest place of that sleep, the door of dreams swung open to its widest.

He was on a high pasture; it was neither Talas nor Keñ-Kol, but wider than both, and its grasses were of light. From the far side a horseman was coming. The horse was a pale

dun tulpar; wherever its hoof touched, grass sprang up. The man upon it — Seytek had never seen him, yet he knew him; blood knows blood, even in a dream. His shoulders were wide as the span between two mountains, his gaze as direct as high noon; in his beard there was neither white nor black, as if time had never worked upon him. This was his great forefather Manas; upon Akkula, coming not from his forty-year-old tomb, but from a place where he had never died at all.

Seytek dismounted and sank to his knee. Manas dismounted also; he took his grandson by the shoulders, raised him up, and kissed him on both eyes.

— Your stature is true, and your gaze is your father's, he said. You were born in Kıyaz's hands and taken from the mouth of death; at thirteen you learned your lineage and took your vengeance on the traitor; you tore your father free from the spell of the black cave and gave him back his tongue; you swept ogre-spawn like Sarıbay from your homeland. You were raised on the white felt, you sat upon the golden throne. Now I have one word for you — hold to it: do not scorn the orphan. I grew up an orphan, in the exile of Altay, on a bed of dog's hide; your father grew up an orphan, in Buhara, not knowing his own name. And you too were born an orphan, in the enemy's camp. The leaven of this line was kneaded with orphanhood — that is why it is harder than stone and clearer than water. If an orphan comes to your throne, seat him in the place of honor; if a fatherless child weeps, know its voice for your own young's. Carry out the law not for the one who has wealth, but for the one who has right.

Then Manas unbound a sword from his waist; its sheath seemed made of star-dust, its hilt of a handful of lightning.

— Its name is Zulpukor, he said. It is given not into the hand of a valiant man, but into the hand of a valiant-hearted line. Take it; but it is not for you. It is for the boy in Bermet's womb — his name shall be Kenen; it has been announced to us as glad tidings. When he is born, let this sword hang at the head of his hearth; when his hand can hold a sword, let him gird it on. And know this: our line continues through him. I have gone, Semetey has gone, and you too will one day go; but so long as this sword rests in its sheath and this blood runs in the vein, the hearth of the Kirghiz will not go dark. The camel bull dies, the calf remains; the grey wolf dies, its track remains. And the track is left not upon the snow, but upon the son.

Seytek took the sword in both hands; its weight was the weight of the world, yet it settled not upon his shoulder but upon his heart. When he raised his head he saw that the

pasture had filled: on the right stood Almambet, his dark eyes still weighing the walls of Beecin; beside him Çubak, whose grin was as wide as a battle. On the left, great Koşoy with his mountain of a body; and foremost of all, his beard swan's-down, his eyes two lamps, the white beard himself — Bakay. Bakay opened both hands to the sky; the others opened theirs; even the grasses of light on that pasture bowed as if in prayer.

— Give Kenen long life, said Bakay's voice; it was not a voice, it was like rain. Give strength to his wrist and mercy to his heart. May Kızır watch his road, may the forty çilten walk at his right hand. May the water of Talas be milk to him, and the stone of Ala-Too his fortress. May his line never be cut off, may his hearth never die, may his smoke never cease to rise — amen!

— Amen, said Manas, Almambet, Çubak, and Koşoy with one mouth; and that amen echoed ninefold beneath the vault of heaven.

When Seytek awoke, the horizon was paling toward dawn; on his cheek there were tears, and in his palm — his palm which he knew to be empty — there was the warmth of a hilt. He did not wake Akbermet; he went out, stood before the ordo, and gazed long at the rising day. Then he sent for Akcoltoy.

Coltoy listened to the dream; as he listened, tears ran down his beard, and when it was done he rose from his place and went down on one knee before Seytek.

— My khan, he said, in my life I have read many dreams; in some I saw calamity, in some good fortune. But this dream is not to be read — it is to be blessed. That father Manas descended into your dream means your throne is confirmed at the court of God. That he gave Zulpukor means the khanship endures not by the sword but by the testament. That he said do not scorn the orphan means your law is received from heaven. And that the name Kenen was bestowed once from a tiger's mouth and once from a forefather's mouth — when one glad tiding enters by two doors, in that house the cradle does not stay empty. He will be born; a lion will be born, his name will be Kenen, his horse Kertulpar stands ready, his sword Zulpukor is promised and ready. The smoke of the Kirghiz will rise, my khan. Bright be your eyes, bright be your homeland.

Seytek raised Coltoy from the ground and pressed him to his breast.

— May your reading be honey in your mouth, he said. The interpreter's due is yours by right: sixty head of stock, led by a prize horse, are yours; cut them from the herd and drive them before his orda.

Akcoltoy, who had spent forty lean years seeking roads in the desert, grew rich that day not on a khan's treasury but on the abundance of a dream; and in the dust of the sixty head driven before him there was Külayım's smile. When the people heard of it they gathered before the ordo; the glad tidings passed from mouth to mouth, the sacrifices of white-grey mares were renewed, and camp carried kımız to camp.

And time flowed as it knows how to flow. The snows closed the passes once more, and once more they loosened; Talas foamed and grew calm. In a single winter Kertulpar grew from foal to colt; the warmth of Zulpukor from the dream never faded from Seytek's palm. And one daybreak, while the morning star had not yet gone out, a cry broke from Akbermet's orda — not thin, but full-throated; not a wail, but a shout. The midwives put their heads out at the door, and their faces were like the day:

— Reward for the good news! A son! A son like a lion!

To say the feast lasted forty days and forty nights would be to say too little; such a feast had not been seen in Talas since the memorial feast of Kökötöy. There was no need to ask the child's name; his name had been bestowed twice before his birth. The white-beards shouted three times into his ear: Kenen! Kenen! Kenen! Kuyalı planted the lance Karasaat at the head of the cradle; Külayım cut a little shirt from cloth of peri hands; Erebay began telling the seven tales of his seven wounds while the child was still in the cradle. Kertulpar broke its tether and came, sniffed the felt of the cradle, and from that day never left the front of the ordo.

When evening came and the guests had scattered, Seytek took his son, swaddling and all, into his arms and went outside. The snows of Ala-Too burned crimson in the last light; the water of Keñ-Kol was singing the song it had sung since the world's first night. Seytek turned his son's face toward the mountains.

— Look, he said softly. Beyond those snowy mountains lies Altay; your great forefather Manas was born there — out of the midst of exile he rose like the sun. This plain is Talas; your grandfather Semetey returned here from Buhara, and from here he walked out of orphanhood into khanship. I was born in the enemy's hands; I came here to take my vengeance, and staying, I found my homeland. But you were born to a feast, born with prayers upon you; may your road be more open than ours. Yet know this: this homeland did not come to you from your forefathers alone — it was taken in trust from your grandchildren. A day comes when I too shall pass on; you will remain, and after you, yours will remain. The camel bull dies, the calf remains. So long as the sword rests in the sheath,

the blood in the vein, the smoke above the hearth — this line will not be cut off, this hearth will not go dark, this epic will end, but it will never end.

Out of the swaddling a tiny fist emerged, opened toward the sky, then caught Seytek's finger and held it fast. The morning star showed itself once more from behind Ala-Too; as if those who had gone were winking at those who remained.

Manas passed from this world, Semetey vanished into mystery, Seytek made the homeland whole.
The river of three generations — from exile to khanate, from mourning to return, from vengeance to peace —
flows through this book like a single stream.

GAZÂ'NİN NEFERİ Y.C. · AN EPIC SAGA NOVEL